

**Special Education Advisory Committee**  
**Loudoun County Public Schools**  
**Annual Report**  
**2008-2009**

October 2009

## Special Education Advisory Committee

The major responsibilities of the Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC), as mandated by the *Regulations Governing Special Education Programs for Children with Disabilities in Virginia*, include:

- Advising the local school system of the needs in the education of children with disabilities.
- Assisting the local school system in the development of long-range plans which will provide needed services for children with disabilities.
- Submitting periodic reports and recommendations regarding the education of children with disabilities to the local school board.
- Reviewing annually the school system's updated special education plan and application for federal funding.

### 2008-2009 Committee Organization

Chairperson: Deana Czaban

Vice-Chair Planning: Cathryn Rice

Vice-Chair Membership: Aundrea Foster

Secretary: Shelley Mills

School Board Liaison: Tom Marshall / Robert DuPree

Committee Members: 15

Subcommittees: Inclusive Practices, Website & Membership

### Summary of 2008-2009 Activities

During the 2008-2009 school year, the SEAC focused on establishing a stronger knowledge base of inclusive practices in LCPS. The Committee also conducted a town hall meeting and parent survey to gain a broader perspective of parent satisfaction with the special education services provided by LCPS. The Committee continued to concentrate on expanding and diversifying its membership base, with measurable success.

1. **Inclusive Practices Subcommittee** - The Committee met with Special Education supervisors to better understand current inclusive education practices and how to implement best practices across all of our schools.
2. **Parent Survey** – The SEAC and Office of Special Education facilitated a parent survey in April, to receive feedback from the parents of children who have an IEP or 504 in LCPS.

October 2009

3. **SEAC PTA/PTO Representative** - The Committee has continued its efforts to expand this role throughout the school system.
4. **Town Hall Meeting** - A successful Town Hall meeting was conducted on May 16, 2009 with over 100 attendees. This provided the Committee and the Office of Special Education with feedback from the public.
5. **Website** - The Committee has been working with the Office of Special Education with improving both the content and the navigation of the website. This will be an ongoing activity.
6. **Communications** - The Committee voted to create a new position, Vice-Chair of Communications, to facilitate better awareness of the SEAC.

### **Summary of Recommendations**

Based on the 2008-2009 SEAC activities, the following is a summary of recommendations that will be elaborated on in the presentation.

1. Develop a best practices approach to **Home–School Communication**
2. Set a standard on **Disability Training**
3. **Long Range Planning to meet needs** - Autism and Early Childhood Special Education
4. Add a **Baseline Screening for Emotional Well Being**
5. Endorse an approach for formal **Peer Interaction and Support Mechanisms**
6. Conduct an ongoing **Exit Survey for Special Educators**
7. Continued proactive approach to **growth with programs that are being implemented in the County.**

### **Presentations for the SEAC 2008-2009**

#### **September 2008**

A presentation from the individuals who had been added to Office of Special Education was made by the specialists: Ellen McGraw- Behavior; Rosemarie McGuinness - Autism; Eileen McCartin- Deaf/Hard of Hearing.

Each presented on their roles, responsibilities and the aspirations for their respective areas of expertise. All three areas are vital in supporting services delivered by the Office of Special Education and ensuring that students are receiving Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE).

**October 2009**

## **October 2008**

Virginia Alternate/Alternative Assessments (VAAP, VGLA, VSIEP) - Christina Lebo, Special Education Coordinator reviewed the alternative testing options for students.

## **November 2008**

Alternative Reading Strategies/Programs- Carol Hughes, consulting teacher, provided an overview of a sampling of research based alternative reading programs available to the students with special needs.

## **December 2008 – No meeting**

## **January 2009**

(PBS) The Positive Behavior Support and (Rtl) Response to Intervention- Cathy Shwaery, Behavior Support Coordinator and Elaine Layman, Principal of Tolbert Elementary School. PBS focuses on improving a school's ability to teach and support positive behavior for all students. Rtl is a comprehensive assessment and intervention process that uses learning rate and level of performance to make educational decisions.

Interim Report from Specialists (9/08-1/09) presented to the Committee.

## **February 2009**

Extended School Year- Mary Kearney presented an overview of the services provided beyond the normal school year for the purpose of providing a (FAPE) Free Appropriate Public Education to a student with a disability.

## **March 2009**

Transitions: Elementary to Middle and Middle to High School-Toni DeLuca and Rebecca Argabrite-Grove facilitated a discussion on the many aspects of transitions for students with special needs.

## **April 2009**

Autism Services in LCPS– Rosemarie McGuinness, Autism Specialist, reviewed the continuum of services for students with Autism and the provisions for expansion of services.

## **May 2009**

Town Hall Meeting- The SEAC and LCPS hosted the town hall meeting for the public to provide input on systemic issues in special education.

## **June 2009**

Parent Survey- SEAC and LCPS asked parents of students, with an IEP or 504, to participate in an online survey and provide feedback on their experiences.

**October 2009**

## **1. Inclusive Practices Subcommittee**

Over the course of the year, the sub-committee met with a variety of Special Education Supervisors and Administrators, to discuss current inclusive practices. The Subcommittee wanted to understand what the characteristics of a successful inclusive school were, and look towards replicating those features across all of our schools. Points of discussion were:

- Consistency in “climate” for inclusion across the district
- The need for strong administrative support
- Accountability of administrator, educator and parent
- Training – best practices for inclusion and disability specific
- Role of educators (special education/general education) for inclusion
- Purpose for inclusion (social, academic & physical)
- Appropriateness of inclusion
- Curriculum modification and adaptation
- Expanding access of specialists beyond self-contained classrooms into general education setting
- Impact of class size on inclusion

In the early spring of 2009, the Inclusive Practices sub-committee decided to conduct an informal survey at ten schools across the district. Special Educators, General Educators, and Administrators participated in the survey responses. This was accomplished with supervisors soliciting feedback for survey.

The survey asked two primary questions: How do you define inclusive practices at your school and what resources and or supports would facilitate inclusive practices at your school? The survey confirms that the areas of concern for staff were similar to the discussions by the Inclusive Practices Subcommittee.

Responses to question one indicated a varied understanding of inclusive practices across staff at all levels. Systemically, this is a concern. For the district to fully implement strong inclusive practices, it is essential that everyone share a common understanding and definition of inclusive practices. Strong support and leadership from building and district administration will be critical in moving this initiative forward. Consistent and cohesive philosophy on what inclusion is and the comfort level of all LCPS staff in working with students with disabilities must be addressed.

With regard to resources and supports, staff identified the following highlights as areas of need:

- 1) Training for all staff in: co-teaching models; training for educators (general education and special education staff) in identifying and understanding learning styles of all students; training in best practices for serving all children; training in behavior management and support; and the training of general and special educators together.
- 2) Additional special education staff.
- 3) All staff involved in common planning time with additional planning time, when possible.
- 4) Opportunities to observe successful co-teaching models.

- 5) Efforts to keep classroom sizes manageable.
- 6) General knowledge of the IEP
- 7) Communication
- 8) All students included in all activities with the philosophy to keep all students in the least restrictive environment (LRE), if possible.
- 9) Culture of inclusion is present at all levels from the top down.

The next steps that the Inclusive Practices Subcommittee and the administrative staff will address are the roles of the educators:

- a. Short-term goals (year 1) – initiate
- b. Medium-term goals (years 2-4) – implementation
- c. Long-term goals (years 5+) – institutionalization

It should be noted that the survey results are consistent with the feedback from the Town Hall, Parent and the 2007 Staff Survey. The Inclusive Practices Subcommittee will continue its work during the 2009-2010 school year and looks forward to developing further recommendations.

The committee is very encouraged that LCPS is proactively seeking ways to improve inclusive practices, such as, Stetson Step-by-Step, Positive Behavior Supports, and Response to Intervention. The outcome of these initiatives will benefit every student. Ultimately, successful inclusive practices require mechanisms of accountability and will impact how inclusive practices are implemented.

## **2. Website**

The Committee has worked throughout the year with the Office of Special Education to improve content and navigation of this website. The website is an important resource for parents and staff to keep up-to-date on the latest information available. With this in mind, it is imperative for the LCPS to maintain a website that is user friendly and informative. Each school is responsible for the content on their website.

Last year, we reported that only three schools listed SEAC on their sites. There is certain information that each school site should have for parents and staff regarding the Special Education department. Parent Resource Center, SEAC and Minority Student Achievement Committee are examples of links that should be available.

The survey we conducted last spring confirmed the need for parents to have a broader grasp of special education processes and services. Empowered with current and accurate information, parents are able to effectively collaborate with their child's team.

The Committee will continue to work with the Department of Pupil Services on this useful tool.

### **3. Membership**

The Committee has had fifteen (15) members who consistently been engaged in its activities. The SEAC monthly meetings receive approximately 25-35 attendees. The meetings consist of parents, administrators, supervisors, a Community Service Board member and a Parent Resource Center representative and representation from the School Board. We appreciate the support in the ongoing effort to better communicate and work with the school system.

The goal for the SEAC is to expand the membership base to twenty-one (21) and diversify the membership with a representation in disability and age group. These ongoing goals will further enhance the committee to effectively represent the population of students with special needs.

The Town Hall and the Parent Survey were effective ways to reach a broader group of parents and get an assessment of perceptions of their child's education. These two avenues generated a lot of interest in the SEAC.

At the beginning of this school year, with the help of the Office of Special Education, the Committee produced and distributed the SEAC 2009-2010 brochure and a kick off letter explaining the role of the SEAC and providing an opportunity to share constructive systemic feedback.

Last year, the SEAC launched an initiative to reach out to the PTA and create a SEAC PTA representative. The goal is for each school to have a parent of a child with special needs represented to better enhance the services at each of the events offered. The membership chairperson created a Powerpoint for the representative to help guide their role as this initiative is being implemented. Heading into this new school year we received a positive response as all involved look for new ways to encourage inclusion and participation.

### **4. Town Hall Meeting – May 16, 2009**

Number of Attendees: 103

The Committee was pleased with the feedback received during the Town Hall meeting. Speakers provided constructive input on a variety of topics outlined below. In particular, one unique comment dealt with the need for a mental health screenings for all students. We offer screenings for hearing, vision, dental and speech, but not for mental health.

A strong contingent Deaf/Hard of Hearing parents spoke passionately about the need for American Sign Language (ASL) to be the universal language for their students. They expressed concern about the availability of certified ASL interpreters.

## **Summary of Feedback from the Town Hall**

### **Training:**

1. Training needed for General Education teachers on disabilities, behavior etc.
2. Staff and parents unaware of services available.
3. Better training for case managers.
4. More training for Principals/Assistant Principals.
5. Better training for basic skills for teachers.
6. Low expectations for Special Education students.
7. Staff need for better training/communication on Extended School Year (ESY).

### **Inclusion:**

1. Increase number of elementary team taught classes.
2. Inclusive athletics at the High School level.
3. Program relocation.
4. Perceived rush to place students in self contained classrooms.
5. Certified ASL interpreters needed for deaf/hh students.

### **Eligibility:**

1. Problems with Child Study process.
2. Need for mental health screening as part of preliminary assessments.
3. Eligibility documents not ready on time for review prior to meeting.
4. Eligibility delays.
5. Denial of eligibility.

### **Individualized Education Plans (IEPs)**

1. Misinformation about legality of recording IEP meetings.
2. IEPs are not being implemented as designed.
3. Need to partner with county/private resources (CSB, In-Step, Psych Svc's).
4. Utilize available resources throughout the year (i.e. behavior specialists)



## Miscellaneous Concerns

1. Deaf programs need to teach ASL.
2. Concern that budget is affecting service delivery to SPED students.
3. Lobbying for mandated insurance bill covering Autism therapy.
4. Qualifications & training of ESY staff; accountability for implementing ESY goals. Impact of budget on ESY decisions.
5. Need for better communication between parents and LCPS re: ESY programs.
6. Appearance of no variation of ESY services to meet individual needs. Only summer school setting being offered.

## SEAC Parent Survey

The SEAC was very pleased with the (10%) response rate for the survey, as well as the diversity of disability and age groups represented. Overall the feedback was quite positive and LCPS should be commended. Eighty percent of parents are satisfied with the Special Education services their child receives. Eighty-two percent of parents agree that their child feels a part of the school community. A more detailed account of the data results can be found in the "Summary of Data" section below.

The final two questions of the survey gave parents the opportunity to comment on what the strengths of the Special Education program were and to make suggestions to improve services. Parents had a lot of positive comments to share about the program strengths, especially the high quality of teachers and instructional assistants.

By far, the most consistent feedback on recommendations to improve services was home / school communication. When a parent is not embraced as a *member* of the IEP team and receives regular communication on their child's progress, the result is quite negative. Other concerns included: lack of timely feedback, performance data not shared, and disregard for parental input.

Another area of significant concern was that staff (general education, special education, administration, and instructional assistants) needs more disability training. Parents expressed concern that members of their child's team did not understand the nature of the disability and its educational, social, and behavioral implications. Outcomes for a student are directly linked to staff having the skill sets necessary to meet the student's needs.

## Summary of Data

- 656 Respondents
- Representing 73 of 76 schools
- All 13 disability categories were represented in responses, with the largest response rates from: 23% - Autism; 15% - OHI; 22% - SLD; and 25% - SLI

October 2009

### **Related Services**

- 59% Speech Therapy
- 31% Occupational Therapy
- 9% Physical Therapy
- 5% Adapted Equipment
- 12% Assistive Technology
- 23% Special Education Counseling
- 1% Sign Language Interpreting Services
- 35% Other

### **Parent feedback on Special Education Services and their knowledge of special education processes.**

- 1) 91% understood the process for determining eligibility for Special Education.
- 2) 80% satisfied with Special Education services.
- 3) 78% agree that child has accommodations/ assistive technology needed for their program.
- 4) 83% agree that the building administrator supports Special Education services for their child.
- 5) 85% agree that the school communicates regularly w/ regard to child's progress.
- 6) 74% agree that their child's needs are understood by general education teachers.
- 7) 83% agree that their child's needs are understood by Special Education teachers.
- 8) 82% agree that their child feels apart of the school community.

**Parent Survey Question - Importance of Special Education Concerns**

<b>Concerns</b>	<b>Needs More Attention</b>	<b>Needs Less Attention</b>
Early Intervention & Awareness Services	78%	20%
Autism Specific Supports & Services	71%	30%
Inclusion of students w/ disabilities w/ gen ed peers	73%	26%
Availability of adaptive equipment/assistive tech	69%	31%
Teacher/staff/parent training re: IEP's	78%	21%
Supports for behavior mgt & intervention	76%	24%
Recruitment, retention of HQ SpEd staff	89%	11%
Eligibility process for SpEd	75%	25%
Transition Planning	81%	19%

**Parent Survey – Description of the Strengths of LCPS Special Education program**

- ❖ Knowledgeable
- ❖ Supportive
- ❖ Willing
- ❖ Dedicated
- ❖ Team work
- ❖ Genuinely interested
- ❖ Adaptability
- ❖ Encouraging
- ❖ Organized
- ❖ Determined
- ❖ Caring
- ❖ Partners
- ❖ Resourceful
- ❖ Effective
- ❖ Flexible
- ❖ Concerned
- ❖ Positive
- ❖ Exceptional
- ❖ Leadership
- ❖ Attentive
- ❖ Patient
- ❖ High quality
- ❖ Understanding
- ❖ Accessible

**October 2009**

**Parent Survey Question - Synopsis of recommendations to improve Special Education services. (Largest # of responses in bold.)**

- **Disability Training**
- **Home / School Communication**
- **Autism Services & supports**
- **Eligibility/ Identification**
- **Retention/ Qualifications of Teachers**
- **Administration**
- **Student Teacher Ratio/ Case Load**
- IEP Accountability
- Reading
- Transitions
- Learning Disabled
- Access to Grade Level Curriculum
- ADHD
- Intellectual Disability Resources
- Emotional Disability
- Deaf and Hard of Hearing
- Program Relocation
- Visual Impairment
- Community Based Programs
- Inclusion
- Data
- Budget
- Extended School Year
- Transportation

## Recommendations

1. Home - school communication was the number one comment brought up by parents in the parent survey. Constructive, two-way communication leads to better collaboration and outcomes for the child. The Committee recommends that LCPS develop a best practices model that places responsibility on both parents and staff to collaborate.
2. Based on feedback from the Town Hall, Parent Survey and Staff Survey 2007\*, there is both a desire and need for staff to have more disability training. The SEAC recommends that LCPS develop a plan that sets a standard that general educators (including Specials teachers) required to receive appropriate information and training on the disabilities of students they teach. This could be accomplished through the following steps:
  - a) Develop a disability overview pamphlet which covers general information about the disability, impact on education, impact on learning style, impact on behavior.
  - b) Develop a mechanism for accountability and access to the disability information (including the student's IEP).
  - c) Develop a list of well respected websites for each disability.
  - d) Develop a framework for schools to use in their School Improvement Plans.
  - e) Utilize Blackboard to share multi-level lesson plans.
  - f) Provide training for building administrators in the more complex disabilities to build on their understanding of the teacher's support needs for these students.
  - g) Provide training for instructional aides, particularly for more complex disabilities where a behavioral component is a factor in the disability.

(\*1516 teachers responded to survey: the majority (70%) wanted hands on/classroom based training; 45% of general educators wanted disability specific training.)

3. The Committee recognizes the necessity of long range planning to meet the needs of students with disabilities, specifically in the Autism and Early Childhood Special Education. These two populations in LCPS continue to grow (approximately 20% growth above normal demographic growth – see Addendum B). A new study published, October 2009; in the American Academy of Pediatrics' Journal *Pediatrics* "found a parent-reported autism prevalence rate of one in every 91 American children, including one in 58 boys. *The Prevalence of Parent-Reported Diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder Among Children in the United States, 2007* used data gathered as part of the 2007 National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH), a national survey directed and funded by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

In the NSCH study, more than 78,000 parents of children aged 3 to 17 years were asked whether their child currently had an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) diagnosis - including autism, Asperger's syndrome, pervasive developmental disorder, or another ASD or whether their child had been given that diagnosis in the past, but was no longer diagnosed with ASD." For the full article, see the following link to the *Autism Speaks* press release on the study. [http://www.autismspeaks.org/press/autism\\_nchs\\_prevalence\\_study\\_1\\_in\\_91.php](http://www.autismspeaks.org/press/autism_nchs_prevalence_study_1_in_91.php)

The Committee recommends that LCPS address this need by developing a short and long term master plan for delivery of services to these two populations, ensuring compliance with State and Federal law. One mechanism for ensuring quality service is to adopt the

*Professional Competencies for Teachers of Autism*, developed by the Autism Society of America and the Council on Exceptional Children.

4. LCPS currently conducts baseline screenings for the following areas: hearing, vision, dental and speech. In light of information shared at the Town Hall meeting, the Committee recommends that LCPS analyze how the mental health needs of students can proactively be assessed. The Committee recommends adding an Emotional Well Being/Risk Assessment to the baseline screening panel.
5. Last year, on several occasions (including parent survey and town hall), parents discussed the need for a more formal approach to encouraging peer interaction and support. The Committee recommends that LCPS consider endorsing a Buddy Program to meet the social needs of children with disabilities. Perhaps, this could be implemented most effectively through the partnership with the Office of Guidance Services.
6. The highest rated concern on the parent survey was the recruitment, hiring and retention of highly qualified special education staff. In light of this, the Committee recommends that the Department of Personnel conduct exit surveys for all Special Education staff leaving the district or transferring out of special education. This information could be used to identify areas of concern and develop strategies to retain highly qualified staff. The district has made an enormous investment in providing high quality training to its staff and so conducting exit interviews would be one way to protect this investment.
7. As a county, we need to be proactive about the continued growth of the Special Education population and meeting their needs. Advances being made by the LCPS such as: Response to Intervention, Positive Behavior Supports and the pilot Stetson Step by Step Inclusive Practices program are all very promising. The Committee applauds the approach that LCPS is taking by investing in their future administrative leaders through Cohort Programs.

## Addendum A

As of December 1, 2008 (supplied by the Office of Special Education)

Primary Disability	Total
Mental Retardation*	240
Severe Disability*	35
Hearing Impairment	77
Speech/Language Impairment	1269
Visual Impairment	24
Emotional Disturbance*	452
Other Health Impairment	872
Orthopedic Impairment	63
Autism	625
Specific Learning Disability	1880
Deaf-Blindness	2
Multiple Disabilities	49
Development Delay	306
Traumatic Brain Injury	16
	5910

\*As of July 7, 2009 the labels for these disabilities were changed, Mental Retardation to Intellectual Disability, Emotional Disturbance to Emotional Disability, and Severe Disability was removed.

## **Addendum B**

As of December 2008, Autism Breakdown by Grade

<b>Grade Level</b>	<b>Number</b>
Pre K	40
K	51
1	54
2	64
3	62
4	53
5	57
6	52
7	45
8	34
9	37
10	33
11	25
12	18
<b>Total</b>	<b>625</b>

As of December 2007, there were 528 students with the label of autism. There is a need to be aware of the annual increase of students with autism above the increase for other disabilities. The other group of with an increase in population is the Early Childhood Special Education students.