

Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC)
Norfolk Public Schools
Approved Minutes 1/9/20

Meeting location, time and date: Bayview Elementary School, 1/9/20, 6:00pm

Attendance:

Members present:	Ellen Fitzenrider, Clifton Frank, Vicky Greco, Matthew Moynihan, Diane Outlaw
Members absent:	Betty Boone, Shirley Confino-Rehder, Teressa Gordon, Katie McCurdy, Seraphine Nyuydine, Tonya Shell, Tasha Washington, Vashti Washington, Shirley Wilson
Consultants present:	Dr. Joy Richardson, Denise Thomas, Ron Richardson
School Board Liaison:	Adale Martin (absent)
Guests:	Robyn Bailey (NPS Parent), Sarah Bailey (Endeppendence Center), Tanya Bhasin (Norfolk School Board Member), Ginny Bobby (NPS Parent), Randall Cuffee (NPS Parent), Tania Tavorez-Cuffee (NPS Parent), Christina Escalante (Naval Station Norfolk School Liaison), Rodney Jordan (Norfolk School Board Member), Denise Lipscomb (NPS Parent), Shannon Mackey (NPS Parent), Carter Melin (NPS Parent), Steven Spears (NPS Parent), Charles Stenger (NPS Parent)

Welcome/Introductions: The meeting was called to order at 6:15 p.m. by the SEAC Chair, Mr. Moynihan, who welcomed everyone in attendance. SEAC members briefly introduced themselves.

Approval of Minutes: The Committee reviewed the revised meeting minutes from 9/12/19 and approved them as written. The minutes from 12/5/19 were also reviewed and approved as presented.

Relative to the portion of the 12/5/19 minutes which included this year’s updated Meeting and Training Calendar, Mr. Moynihan informed the group of the upcoming SEAC training workshop on “Invisible Disabilities” to be held on Thursday, March 5, 2020 at 6 p.m. at a school location TBA.

In response to Ms. Bobby’s question about the opportunity for stakeholders to provide their input to the Local Special Education Plan, this opportunity will be provided on or before the Committee’s April business meeting. Dr. Richardson gave a brief update on last year’s plan. She noted, as part of the efforts under the Comprehensive Coordinated Early Intervening Services (CEIS) which are funded through the Learning Support/Special Education Department’s budget, a dedicated social worker and school counselor have been hired and will start January 13, 2020.

SEAC member Dr. Fitzenrider also highlighted the May 7 parent training workshop on “Critical Decision Points,” which will be conducted by local staff from the Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center (PEATC), which serves families and professionals of children with disabilities in Virginia. This workshop is scheduled for 6 pm at a school location TBA.

Dr. Richardson reported that flyers will begin to be distributed district-wide to inform families of the upcoming SEAC business meetings and training workshops. She stated that the emails of parents attending tonight’s meeting will be added to the SEAC distribution list.

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As discussed by the Committee at its January meeting, Dr. Richardson explained the purpose of the 2 letters currently being drafted by Mr. Moynihan, on behalf of SEAC, specifically (1) the Annual Report/Letter to the School Board that will include SEAC recommendations regarding the priorities and strategies for meeting the needs of students with disabilities in the division and (2) a letter covering multiple topics including SEAC membership application process, the need for school board responsiveness to the previous Annual Report, and consistent attendance by the school board liaison at SEAC meetings and division transparency (for example with recent and ongoing stakeholder concerns related to reports by Child Protective Services (CPS) of the physical abuse of students with disabilities by a special education teacher at Bay View Elementary and the related mismanagement of school and division administrators in failing to follow protocol and safeguards to protect our most vulnerable students).

Announcements: Endependence Advocacy Coordinator Sarah Bailey introduced herself and announced an independent living skills class scheduled for Friday, January 24, 2020 at 12 noon. She noted that she brought a copy of the event flyer, as well as her business cards, for those interested.

Public Comments:

Mr. Moynihan explained the purpose of tonight's town hall as part of the SEAC's efforts to facilitate needed transparency, improved communications, and transformative family engagement to better serve and support our students with disabilities. Following a summary of guidelines for public comments, Mr. Moynihan opened the floor to an extended period of public comments from the stakeholders in attendance. Some public comment was submitted in writing and a response will be provided during an upcoming meeting.

Speaker 1 raised the need for training conducted by the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) and asked what is being done to raise the level of competency of NPS teachers and staff to address the critical priority of the mental health needs of students with disabilities, especially those who are in crisis and suffering from self-harm.

Speaker 2 shared her student's experience of significant regression when transitioning from a placement in a program serving students with multiple-disabilities to the more restrictive environment of a SECEP classroom. She expressed concerns about the safety and health of her student as well as the potential financial sacrifices by families like hers to appropriately place students in special education programs that will provide the educational services and supports that NPS does not currently provide.

Speaker 3 expressed several concerns, including: the need for stronger and direct support systems of educators, parents and students with disabilities to help fulfill their potential and give guidance for pathways to college, career and service; strategies to address the stress, anxiety, test-taking demands, and potential capacity building of students with disabilities when taking the SOLs and other high-stakes tests; improving communications about SEAC and Learning Support/Special Education meetings and workshops, as well as other supports/services for students and families; improving accountability of all decision-makers involved in ensuring students are provided with effective supports in their education setting

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Speaker 4 recounted experiences and serious concerns as a paraprofessional and parent of a student with disabilities. The stakeholder expressed frustration that knowledge of tonight's town hall was only by happenstance and that grave injustices continue due to lack of tools and resources available to special educators and the families they serve. *Speaker 4* requested resource teachers to help students with disabilities in small group instruction of reading, writing and math; SEAC meeting notices to families to encourage advocacy, particularly for financial and human resources; stronger collaboration by students' IEP Committees and teaching teams; strategies and advocacy for smaller student-teacher ratios to mitigate bullying, socio-emotional stressors, and text-taking anxiety; more supports to build students' potential and effectively address academic pressures of meeting educational requirements; closing achievement gaps.

Speaker 5 shared his and his wife's experience as the parent of an NPS student with limited communication skills who they believe has been physically abused in the school setting. He expressed the need for more special education program funding, specifically to purchase, install and maintain security cameras within classrooms for children who are non-verbal and have limited mobility, as well as more compensation and training for special educators and staff. *Speaker 5* also expressed the continued need to advocate for those who are not able to advocate for themselves.

Speaker 6 expressed concern that parents like herself are not aware of SEAC and asked why communications from Learning Support are not readily available. She also noted that all parents want to know that their children are safe at school, especially as they move to middle and high school.

Speaker 7 discussed her experience as a former SEAC officer, parent of a student with disabilities, and wife of a special educator. She expressed concern about poor communications of SEAC meetings and related events, and even graver concern for the continued disregard of proven abuse reports by administrators who are ultimately responsible for the safety and well-being of NPS students with disabilities.

Speaker 8 shared public comments regarding the organizational structure and special educational service delivery flowchart of the NPS Learning Support/Special Education Department that were shared by her and her student with disabilities at the December 18 School Board Budget Hearing. She highlighted concerns about the efficacy of the Department as structured, including current leadership, and has requested the hire of a Special Education Director dedicated to the centralized direction and oversight of the models and delivery of educational services and supports for the more than 4,400 NPS students who have IEPs.

Speaker 9 recounted his experience over the last several years as the parent of a student whose educational placement has resulted in his taking legal action against multiple agencies, in order to address the conflicts of interest and lack of accountability he has encountered with the City of Norfolk's administration of the Children's Services Act funding. He also expressed the need for the school division request funding for the hire of both a Special Education Program Director and in-house attorney. *Speaker 9* expressed his continued concern in the school division's low graduation rates of students with disabilities.

Other Business/Closing:

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Speaking as an individual School Board Member, Mr. Jordan, who is the former School Board Chair and Board Liaison to SEAC, explained that he attended the town hall because he wanted to listen to the concerns shared. Mr. Jordan also noted that he has recognized the need for independent legal counsel for the school division and will continue working through the budgeting process to request the appropriate level of funding to fill this need.

School Board Member Ms. Bhasin announced the date of the upcoming School Board business meeting, which has been scheduled for Wednesday, January 22, 2020 at 7 pm, at the Central Administration Building and encouraged stakeholders to attend and/or speak.

Mr. Moynihan and Ms. Greco thanked all the meeting attendees for taking the time to attend the extended meeting and especially for sharing their personal family stories.

The meeting adjourned at 8:05 pm.

Respectfully submitted,
Vicky Manugo Greco
Secretary