

December 15, 2021

Norfolk Public Schools
800 East City Hall Avenue, Suite 1201
Norfolk, Virginia 23510

Dear School Board Chair Dr. Martin, School Board Members, and Dr. Byrdsong:

On behalf of the Norfolk Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC), I submit this letter as the 2021 Annual Report to the School Board. Please accept our report.*

First, we would like to commend the teachers and staff who have continued to prevail in meeting the needs of our students with disabilities (SWD) during the uncertainties and changes brought about by the Covid-19 public health crisis. The SEAC recognizes the difficulty of finding qualified special education personnel but encourages Human Resources to continue recruiting qualified personnel, as well as developing compensation strategies to attract and retain educators in roles where there are vacancies.

Additionally, the SEAC respectfully encourages our Governance Team to adopt the recommendations of the Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS) which we believe would help to improve the entire school division:

“A common theme throughout the study questions involves the use of an interdisciplinary approach to problem-solving, strategic planning, and implementation. When an interdisciplinary approach is not practiced, there is a higher likelihood that unanticipated consequences will follow, disproportionately affecting the voices not heard – in this case, the voice of special education.

Too often when a district undertakes activities to improve teaching/learning for students with disabilities, there is an assumption that this task can be accomplished through the lens, voice, and efforts of special education representatives alone. This approach is misplaced and sets up practices for failure or inadequate outcomes. It is not possible for special education administrators and personnel to unilaterally improve achievement and social/emotional outcomes without a coordinated and comprehensive effort that involves the collective and intentional work of all educators and support staff at the district and school levels. (CGCS Special Education Data Review for Norfolk Public Schools, submitted Summer 2021, page 92)

Now that our students and staff have returned to school for in-person instruction five days each week for the past three months, this report is being submitted at the end of the first quarter of 2021-2022. These are our recommendations in the following key areas:

Academics

The purpose of education is to support children in developing the skills, the knowledge, and the dispositions that will allow them to be responsible, contributing members of their community. Efficient literacy and numeracy skills are imperative to achieving career goals and becoming lifelong learners. The division Equity Report 2020-2021 included STAR Reading and STAR Math scores for students with disabilities (SWD) and highlighted the following student outcomes:

Literacy

Only 38.89 percent of students with disabilities were proficient readers. STAR scores 2020-2021 school year proficient and above: **3rd gr. 27.21%**; **4th gr. 28.30%**; **5th gr. 19.87%**; **6th gr. 21.61%**; **7th gr. 15.53%**; **8th gr. 12.55%** (Division Equity Report 2020-2021: October 6, 2021)

Numeracy

Approximately, **45%** of NPS students with disabilities were proficient in math. STAR scores 2020-2021 proficient and above: **2nd gr. 33.89%**; **3rd gr. 34.44%**; **4th gr. 31.94%** (Division Equity Report 2020-2021: October 6, 2021)

SEAC Recommendations

- Continue to make gains in strengthening standardized practices and professional development opportunities in Special Education throughout NPS, including IEP development (IEP At a Glance) and data collection procedures, as well as training opportunities for case managers, inclusion teachers, general education teachers who teach students with IEPs and 504 plans, and special educators.
- Utilize the [National Center on Intensive Interventions](#) to learn more about effective/high-quality data-based individualized instructional strategies for implementation by IEP Committees, as part of the division's goal to increase staff expertise in specially designed instruction, high leverage practices, and effective co-planning and co-teaching
- Evaluate evidence-based reading and math programs in collaboration with Curriculum and Instruction, using [What Works Clearinghouse](#), as part of efforts to close achievement gaps
- Train every teacher and paraprofessional in the Science of Reading and continue to provide targeted professional development in the areas of learning, literacy and language disorders, as part of continuous professional development
- Provide every teacher and paraprofessional with Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) memberships, as part of the division's efforts to provide ongoing coaching and instructional support
- Create a data review team that disaggregates, cross analyzes, and critically examines National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) scores, STAR results, SOL scores, and alternative assessments, working in conjunction with monthly data meetings held at the building level and the meetings of the elementary and secondary principal associations. The teams should regularly analyze the data and propose solutions to address student outcome disparities.

Behavior

All behaviors serve a purpose that express a want or need. However, a lack of appropriate communication, problem solving, conflict resolution skills, social-emotional learning (SEL) supports, and other school-related factors result in increased levels of inappropriate behaviors as shown below:

In-School Suspensions

In-school suspension rates for the 2019-2020 school year by race/ethnicity: Asian students 0.03%; Black students were **77.6%**; Hispanic students 7.3%; Two or more races 4.3%; White students 9.0%; Students with disabilities 14.2%; economically disadvantaged students **83.6%**; English Language Learners 2.5%; Gifted Learners 10.6%. **A disproportionate number of Black and economically disadvantaged students are being placed in in-school suspension.** (NPS 2020-21 Annual Equity Report: October 6, 2021)

Short Term Suspensions

Black students comprised **81%** of all suspended students with IEPs, yet they comprised only **58%** of all students with IEPs. No other racial/ethnic group of students with IEPs were suspended at a rate larger than their proportion of students with IEPs. Short term suspension rates for the 2019-2020 school year by race/ethnicity: Asian students 0.03%; Black students **80.9%**; Hispanic students 5.8%; Two or more races 4.9%, White students 7.6%; Students with disabilities **23.2%**; economically disadvantaged **86.2%**; English Language Learners 2.1%; Gifted Learners 8.8%. **A disproportionate number of Black students, students with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged students were given short term suspensions.** (NPS 2020-21 Annual Equity Report)

Long Term Suspensions

Long term suspension rates for the 2019-2020 school year by race/ethnicity: Black students were **87.1%**; Hispanic students TS*; Two or more races TS*, White TS*; Students with disabilities 27.2%; economically disadvantaged **88.6%**; English Language Learners TS*; Gifted Learners TS.* **Data points indicate that Black students more than likely correlate with economically disadvantaged students as discipline data show nearly identical percentages.** *TS- Too small to report/less than 5 students (NPS 2020-21 Annual Equity Report: October 6, 2021)

SEAC Recommendations:

- **Require implicit bias and cultural competency training for all teachers and administrators in order to reduce the number of discipline referrals, as part of division-wide strategy to promote better understanding of our school district's shared values of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI)**
- **Provide additional Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) training for all staff members ([PBIS.org](https://pbis.org)), as part of efforts to create a culture of caring in NPS**
- **Explore the use of Restorative Justice practices, as part of the full implementation of PBIS with fidelity within each school community**
- **Address bullying and harassment of our SWD by establishing and promoting student-led inclusion/friendship clubs, as well as future educator and community service organizations, at all of our schools**
- **Implement best practices, especially with regard to maintaining appropriate pupil/teacher ratios and class sizes for inclusion classrooms, in order to improve behavioral and academic outcomes for all students, including our SWD**
- **Continue to provide sufficient time for the SEAC to review related data and the progress made in the division's Special Education Annual Plan/Part B Flow-Through Federal Grant Application**

Graduation Rates

Increase in dropout rates among students with IEPs from **15.5%** in 2017-18 to 17.9 in 2018-19, and strategies used to decrease the rate from **24.4%** in 2016-17 to **15.5%** in 2017-18. (2020-2021 Chronic Absenteeism and Graduation Updates: November 3, 2021)

SEAC Recommendations:

- **Promote consistent collaboration among secondary special education case managers, high school graduation coaches, school counselors and building administrators to develop effective goals and objectives for on-time graduation of SWD in grades 6-12**
- **Ensure Individual Education Plan (IEP) development and review includes provisions for attendance monitoring and absenteeism resolution, parental and student on-time graduation checklists, frequently asked questions (FAQs) for critical decision points, etc.**

Teacher Training

There is a fundamental need to strengthen division-wide instructional coaching and professional development practices, including the requirement of professional development for all staff regarding IDEA legal requirements and responsibilities under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to assure that the needs of all the students are met. Case managers working in partnership with building administrators must continue best practices, such as on-site professional mentoring, the continued use of division-wide special education forms for student Individual Education Plans (IEPs), and continuous professional development updates regarding training opportunities, particularly in the area of evidence-based inclusion and classroom management strategies for all instructional personnel.

SEAC Recommendations:

- **Identify and invest in additional research-based reading programs (i.e., What Works Clearinghouse), as part of the division's efforts to implement best practices in reading instruction**
- **Additionally, demonstrate commitment to providing opportunities for all teachers and staff in the area of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Training**
- **Conduct ongoing progress monitoring to determine the need for intensive interventions for more effective case management and meaningful annual review of IEPs**
- **Create a robust [Response to Intervention \(RTI\)](#) process to decrease the number of students referred for special education evaluation**
- **Develop and maintain a year-round mentoring (induction) program for new teachers in the areas of inclusive and evidence-based practices, social and emotional needs, data literacy, and technology**
- **Expand the Teacher in Residence programs at all of our secondary schools**
- **Send NPS representatives to local universities (ex., Old Dominion University, Norfolk State University, Christopher Newport University, Virginia Wesleyan University, Hampton University, and for para educators programs at Tidewater Community College, and Bryant & Stratton College, etc.) to cultivate relationships and recruit educator candidates**

Collaboration

There must be more of a division-wide focus on building welcoming, collaborative relationships with parents, guardians, and advocates. There is a widespread and dedicated community of supporters for special education in Norfolk who are ready to assist the Board in fostering these relationships. Local partners in special education include the medical community, agencies and nonprofits that serve individuals with disabilities, and City youth-programming departments, such as the public libraries and recreational centers.

SEAC Recommendations:

- **Promote ongoing partnership efforts with the Children's Hospital of the King's Daughters (CHKD), particularly with the existing hospital school program, neurological and behavioral health departments, and future CHKD Mental Health Hospital**
- **Collaborate with local disabilities and autism advocacy groups to build knowledge around special education issues in our school communities**
- **Continue outreach to the Infant & Toddler Connection of Norfolk (ITCN) and Eastern Virginia Medical School (EVMS), as part of ongoing efforts to engage future NPS families and healthcare providers in our community**
- **Re-establish a volunteer registration program for community members who wish to support special education, as well as social-emotional learning, for our most vulnerable students within Norfolk Public Schools**
- **Recruit for a Board-Certified Behavioral Analyst Position, which remains a significant staffing need within the Department of Learning Support/Special Education Services via Virginia Public School Behavior Analyst Network ([vapsban](#))**
- **Foster collaborative partnerships to help create additional postsecondary community-centered career opportunities for our graduates**

The SEAC encourages the School Board to continue its dialogue with the Norfolk City Council to reopen Recreation Centers and Libraries currently closed in the initial response to the pandemic. Reopening is important to provide the City's youth with positive, safe, recreational and educational activities, **especially during the closure of school for the professional work days for teachers.**

The SEAC respectfully requests **inclusion of SEAC leadership when the School Board Policy Committee meets concerning issues that directly impact students with disabilities**, such as development of the recent Restraint and Seclusion Policy.

The SEAC reconvened at the end of the last school year from March 2021 through June 2021. We adopted updates to our By-Laws, elected new officers, and set the meeting calendar for the current school year. Members have attended training conducted by the Parent Educational and Advocacy Training Center (PEATC) in partnership with the VDOE to learn more about their roles serving on the SEAC. Working collaboratively with Dr. Glenda Walter, Senior Coordinator of Learning Support, the SEAC website was updated with past meeting Agendas and Minutes, current member roster, organizational information including virtual meeting registration, as well as the process of submitting public comments.

We have met each month of this school year thus far and adopted a SEAC Brochure for distribution to the public. Additionally, the SEAC continues to inform the City's Commission on Persons with Disabilities of our activities.

The SEAC looks forward to continuing to work with the School Board in its mission to provide the best possible educational outcomes for all the students in Norfolk Public Schools. We welcome you to join us for our monthly meetings on the first Thursdays at 6:00 pm via Zoom:

January 6, 2022

February 3, 2022

March 3, 2022

April 7, 2022
May 5, 2022

Thank you and best wishes for 2022.

Respectfully Submitted,

Vashti Washington
SEAC Co-Chair

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'VW', with a stylized flourish at the end.

*This annual report was due June 15, 2021. We hope you excuse the late submission but the additional time allowed the SEAC to develop a better report.