

June 15, 2022

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

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

On behalf of the Norfolk Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC), **we respectfully submit this letter as the 2022 Annual Report to the School Board and Superintendent, six months following the December 15th release of our 2021 Annual Report.** The Committee's recommendations highlighted within these 2 companion reports for the 2021-2022 school year are informed in part by the public data that was reported to the Board in the Summer 2021 Council of Great City Schools (GCGS) Special Education Data Review for Norfolk Public Schools, in addition to the recent Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) Norfolk City Public Schools FFY 2020 Special Education Performance Report.

The GCGS and VDOE reports, as well as internal quarterly reports presented to the Board throughout this year, **document the continued and unsatisfactory student achievement disparities**, as well as the numerous ongoing challenges in providing our students with disabilities the effective individualized instruction and related services that they need and deserve.

Given the stark picture consistently offered by the data, the SEAC continues to recognize and commend the estimable work by teachers, staff, and administration during our school community's ongoing recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, the return to the first full school year of in-person learning for students, and the important inception of the school division's five-year strategic plan. Now, with a division-wide renewal mandate before us, the SEAC emphasizes that the observations and recommendations communicated within this report are offered in the spirit of collaboration to significantly improve the educational experiences and outcomes of our students with disabilities (SWD), underscored by the full accountability beyond compliance measures to more fully meet the needs of our students. Consequently, we look forward to program review updates about the impending completion of the GCGS special education program audit and findings.

The SEAC members wish again to extend our deep appreciation to all of our teachers and staff who have continued to prevail in meeting the needs of all our students, especially our students with disabilities, during the uncertainties and changes brought about by the pandemic. Given the frontline feedback by our educators, we are also highly aware of the significant behaviors of our young people who have borne a disproportionate burden of the public health crisis and the social-emotional impact on their daily lives.

The SEAC respectfully submits the following recommendations for your full consideration and feedback:

Student Behavior - Just as we know that consistent attendance is critical to student success, student access to comprehensive social-emotional and behavioral support and interventions are also needed for authentic student engagement, learning, achievement, and preparation for college, career or service.

- Find alternatives to in-school and out-of-school suspension in order to keep our students learning in the classroom. Improve staff training opportunities that are culturally responsive for behavioral interventions and disciplining students with disabilities.

- Build positive and supportive classrooms by promoting practices within/between school buildings and among school staff to share effective strategies and available resources.
- Enhance social-emotional learning (SEL) opportunities by developing and providing concrete and sustainable support resources as part of strengthened Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and other in-school resources, particularly for students who are overwhelmed and uncomfortable by their own feelings.
- Ensure availability of SEL books and materials in all school media centers and the NPS Parent Resource Center, including digital items for students and the adults who teach and support them.
- Honor the diversity of voices by developing standards and practices that increase student engagement, especially our students from underrepresented backgrounds and experiences and their families.
- Develop more affirming alternatives for behavior management and mental health supports in response to results of school climate surveys completed by students, staff, and families.

Post-Secondary Education and Training

- Increase student enrollment in higher education within one year of leaving high school from 24.73% to 35.50% as indicated by the Indicator 14 state goal of the recent Performance Report.
- Establish, strengthen and sustain partnerships with local colleges and universities, especially with respect to grow-your-own initiatives such as internships, paraprofessional training, etc.
- Similarly, work closely with external agencies and organizations, such as the state's Department of Aging and Rehabilitative Services (DARS) and such community-based groups as the Independence Center, to help improve post-secondary outcomes for our SWD.

Lastly, the SEAC recognizes the significant challenges and difficulties in retaining, recruiting, and hiring qualified special education personnel due to upheavals in the labor market; however, the Committee unreservedly appeals to the School Board and Administration to evaluate and enhance current retention efforts, continue aggressive and innovative recruitment, and develop compensation strategies to attract, hire and retain educators in the many schools where there are numerous and concerning vacancies. The Committee has discussed the findings and recommendations reported within the U.S. Secretary of Education's staffing memo published in December 2021. While the examples of leveraging emergency funds shared by Dr. Cardona could possibly help to reduce future inequities in staffing, we remain concerned by troubling lags in ensuring our veteran educators are appropriately compensated by administrative corrective action to address compression of salary steps based on years with NPS.

Special Education Staff

- Identify means to implement and allocate funding for competitive compensation for special education teachers as well as difficult-to-staff positions including school psychologists, speech pathologists, etc.
- Assign dedicated staff to perform initial evaluations in order to improve timely completion of initial evaluations required to determine eligibility. This recommendation addresses the goal of meeting compliance requirements of eligibility determination within 65 days at 100% as indicated by 2020 Performance Report Indicator 11.

- Leverage the use of emergency relief funds and grants to address the crisis of special education staffing (ex. VDOE Superintendent's Memo #115-22: regarding July 1, 2022 deadline for recruitment and retention support grants).
- Protect planning for special education teachers to support compliance with instruction and data collection as required by students' individualized educational plans (IEP), functional behavioral assessments (FBA), behavioral intervention plans (BIP) and special education related determination meetings, including manifestation determination and review (MDR), special education committee (SEC), and IEP meetings.
- Evaluate school climate survey results for students/teachers/staff with regard to special education and inclusion in order to enhance 5 year strategic planning and implementation.
- Provide as appropriate SEAC with reports re: special ed/learning support staffing levels, vacancies at all schools/facilities (i.e., teachers, paraprofessionals, LEAs/designees/special ed chairs, case managers at each school building) in order to give clearer focus on difficult-to-staff positions.
- Provide professional development regarding SEL to better meet needs of SWD and the teachers and staff who support our students and expand grow-your-own teacher prep programs, Teacher-In-Residence, and licensure/endorsement completion programs.

Collaboration via Improved Parent and Family Engagement - Performance by NPS in this performance indicator area is reported at 49.4%, which is significantly below the state standard of 80%.

- Fund full-time Parent Resource Center technician and identify a viable space to house the Parent Resource Center that is accessible by public transportation and centrally located.
- Enhance division-wide and school-level expectations in communication and outreach practices executed by the Department of Communications and Engagement to communicate more consistently and effectively stakeholder engagement opportunities, as well as training offerings and school outreach events for parents and families of SWD.
- Provide user-friendly summary in easy-to-understand language of the regulatory information detailed in the parent responsibilities booklet and VDOE special education updates throughout the year.
- Help promote the work and responsibilities of the SEAC, as well as the ongoing opportunities for public comment at SEAC meetings, by including such information in an expanded special education section in the student conduct handbook and making available paper copies of the current SEAC brochure at eligibility and IEP meetings.

The SEAC hopes that these prioritized recommendations will be evaluated for feasibility and potential implementation, especially as NPS embarks on the implementation of the 5-year strategic plan. We also look forward to receiving collaborative feedback from members of the division's Strategic Planning Implementation and Governance Teams to learn more about the establishment of measurable goals for the coming school year. We welcome Board members, administrators and all interested stakeholders to join us at our monthly meetings, with plans to reconvene the full Committee in-person at the start of the new school year. Best wishes for a safe summer.

Sincerely,

Mr. Vashti Washington and Dr. Nicole Anthony

NPS SEAC Co-Chairs

Attachments (4): 2021 SEAC Annual Report; US Secretary of Education December 16, 2021 Letter re: Labor Shortages; VDOE NPS Special Education Performance Report; VDOE June 3, 2022 Superintendent's Memo #115-22