

# Virginia State Special Education Advisory Committee Annual Report

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Prepared for  
Virginia Board of Education

By  
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State Special Education Advisory Committee (SSEAC)

## **Table of Contents**

Part I: Mission and Structure .....	3
Part II: Strategic Issues in Special Education.....	5
Part III: Future Issues and Improvement .....	8

## **Part I: Mission and Structure**

The State Special Education Advisory Committee (SSEAC) for the Commonwealth of Virginia is organized and functions in accordance with the mandate in the Board of Education's Annual Plan for Special Education and in Sections 300.650-300.653, Rules and Regulations for the Administration of Public Law 105-17, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 1997. The committee's functions include the following:

1. Advise the State Education Agency (SEA) of unmet needs within the State in the education of children with disabilities;
2. Comment publicly on any rules or regulations proposed by the State regarding the education of children with disabilities;
3. Advise the SEA in developing evaluations and reporting on data to the Secretary under section 1418 of the IDEA;
4. Advise the SEA in developing corrective action plans to address findings identified in Federal monitoring reports under Part B of the IDEA;
5. Advise the SEA in developing and implementing policies relating to the coordination of services for children with disabilities.
6. Advising on eligible students with disabilities in adult prisons who have been convicted as adults and incarcerated in adult prisons;
7. Review the policies and procedures of state operated programs, the Virginia School for the Deaf and Blind at Staunton and the Virginia School for the Deaf, Blind, and Multi-Disabled at Hampton; and
8. Prepare and present an Annual Report to the Virginia Board of Education and the Superintendent of Public Instruction. This report shall be made available to the public.

## **Membership**

The committee is composed of representatives of stakeholder groups as prescribed by IDEA 97. These individuals have a common interest in meeting the educational needs of children and youth with disabilities throughout the Commonwealth. The membership includes eight parents of children with disabilities, two individuals with disabilities, a teacher, a representative of institutions of higher education that prepare special education and related services personnel, a local superintendent, a local special education director, a representative of an organization concerned with transition services, a representative of other state agencies involved in the financing or delivery of related services to children with disabilities, and a representative of a correctional agency. Members are appointed by the Board of Education to a four-year term and are eligible for reappointment for an additional four-year term. Individual citizens and organizations are invited to nominate candidates for appointment to the committee. Terms of membership are staggered to assure continuity. Members are reimbursed for expenses incurred while attending meetings; however, members serve without compensation. The committee is staffed by designated liaisons from the Department of Education that are knowledgeable in the field

of special education. The department also provides technical and clerical assistance to the committee.

## **Organization**

The activities of the committee are governed by its by-laws, which were last revised in April 2001. The SSEAC year runs from July 1<sup>st</sup> to June 30<sup>th</sup>. Three subcommittees conduct the work of the full committee. In addition, the SSEAC has a membership subcommittee to assist with the appointment process when vacancies occur within the membership and a special committee to review the policies and procedures of state operated programs and the two state schools. Staff members are available to each of the subcommittees to provide technical assistance, clarification of Department of Education procedures, and background information.

Committee members are assigned to one of the three subcommittees to take advantage of each member's expertise, interests and concerns. A member of the SSEAC executive committee chairs each subcommittee. Subcommittees may meet independently, make recommendations on issues and topics discussed with recommended action. Such action may take one of several forms: further study, requests for additional information from the Department, or referral to the Board of Education by written communication, oral presentation, or public comment. The three subcommittees this year were:

1. General Supervision,
2. Free Appropriate Public Education in Least Restrictive Environment, and
3. Parent Involvement and Secondary Transition.

These subcommittees were aligned with the federal Continuous Improvement Monitoring Process (CIMP) cluster areas addressed in *Virginia's Special Education Self-Assessment*.

## **Meetings**

The committee meets in regular session four times a year; subcommittees and the executive committee meet as necessary to fulfill their responsibilities. All regular meetings are open to the public, and a public comment period is offered at each meeting.

All meetings in 2001-2002 were held in Richmond. In addition to its four regular meetings, the Membership committee met twice to review the nominations of candidates for several vacancies that occurred on the committee. Additionally, a subcommittee met to review the policies and procedures of the state operated programs and the Virginia Schools for the Deaf, Blind, and Multi-disabled.

## **Part II: Strategic Issues in Special Education**

### **The Status of Special Education in Virginia**

During 2001-2002 the SSEAC continued its role as the steering committee for the federal Continuous Improvement Monitoring Process (CIMP) for federal monitoring of its Part B special education programs in Virginia as outlined by the United States Department of Education – Office of Special Education Programs (US-OSEP). In this role, the SSEAC spent the majority of time this year discussing the findings of the self-assessment phase of the CIMP. Proposed strategies to address these findings for the improvement phase of the CIMP were identified and completed for the areas of *General Supervision*, *Parental Involvement* and *Secondary Transition*. Setting standards for evidence of change and desired benchmarks for improvements comprised much of the discussion by the committee. The SSEAC completed this process for the area of *Free Appropriate Public Education in the Least Restrictive Environment* at its meeting in July 2002.

### **Summary of Concerns**

Throughout the year, committee members also discussed various concerns, which are noted below.

#### Qualified Personnel

##### **Licensure and Teacher Shortages:**

Committee members continue to be concerned about the number of special education teachers leaving the field and the number of teaching staff in Virginia with special education conditional licensure. The Committee reviewed data by school division regarding the number and percentages of special education teachers with conditional licenses. As the number of students with disabilities are involved in the general education curriculum and the state assessment program increases, it is vital that a highly qualified staff be available to ensure their academic success.

##### **Paraprofessionals:**

Paraprofessional staff development is critical to the success of students. As more of our students are involved in the regular education environment, the staff working with them should be highly qualified. The draft Paraprofessional Guide was developed and training sessions were scheduled throughout the state in the Superintendent 's Regions.

#### Literacy Level of Materials

Committee members continue to express concern about the literacy level of materials given to parents, including the Procedural Safeguards and Parent Guide to Special Education. A subcommittee was formed to address diverse literacy levels.

## Continuum of Placement Options and the Least Restrictive Environment

Some school divisions continue to be in non-compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and state regulations in providing a continuum of placement options for students with disabilities. The Committee requested additional information from the Department before making specific recommendations regarding improvement planning in this area.

## Virginia Schools for the Deaf and Blind

The SSEAC was apprised of heating problems in the Hampton facility. The SSEAC requested and received information concerning this situation with assurances of appropriate corrective action provided by the school and the Department. The SSEAC believes that enhancing parent involvement should become a priority focus of both schools.

## Student Advisory Committee Recommendations

The Board of Education referred recommendations concerning special education student concerns that it received in January 2002 from the Student Advisory Committee to the SSEAC. Department staff presented information to the SSEAC about these recommendations. The SSEAC plans to consider strategies to incorporate these concerns as expressed by the Student Advisory Committee as we continue our work in the state improvement planning process.

## Standards of Quality Recommendations

The Board of Education requested review of the Standards of Quality (SOQ) for recommendations addressing special education programs. The SSEAC reviewed the SOQ to generate broad recommendations that will address policies and procedures that:

- drive high expectations for students with disabilities,
- ensure accountability for the achievement of students with disabilities, and
- might be barriers, which inhibit the achievement of students with disabilities or the accountability of schools and districts.

These recommendations are grouped according to SOQ features to retain and recommendations for SOQ change.

### **SOQ Features to Retain:**

1. It is beneficial to keep students with disabilities in the accountability systems. When students with disabilities do not participate in one or more of the Standards of Learning (SOL) assessments, it is a barrier for them to have the opportunity to access SOL remediation programs and other benefits.
2. Maintain expectations for highly qualified personnel.

### **Recommendations for SOQ Change:**

1. Reduce class size of general education classes which have students with disabilities included.
2. Review special education teacher- student ratios in light of more complex student needs.
3. Address the local school divisions' responsibility for identifying and serving preschool age students with disabilities. Consider establishing universal preschool programs, especially to address the No Child Left Behind Act goals.
4. Add special education teachers to the remediation standards committee.
5. There should be an explicit policy statement that students with disabilities have access to all programs, including the use of technology to have timely access to programs and materials.
6. Principles of universal design should be applied to course development and outcome measures to facilitate the achievement of students with disabilities.
7. Establish alternative means for demonstrating mastery of SOL content for students with disabilities. Other measures of assessing progress would facilitate achievement for students with disabilities and possibly increase school graduation.
8. Schools need reading specialists at elementary level as well as middle and high school levels, which is based and funded on the number of students in the school. This should not be left to local discretion.
9. Increase funding for local educational agencies to implement the SOQ.

### **Part III: Future Issues and Improvement**

The SSEAC will monitor the impact of the No Child Left Behind legislation upon students with disabilities in Virginia.

Additional issues and recommendations include the following:

- Improve monitoring, complaint, and due process procedures to ensure that all areas of noncompliance are consistently identified and corrected in a timely and effective manner.
- Increase avenues for parent input and use data gathered to address parental concerns and increase the levels of satisfaction with special education programs.
- Continue the collection and use of data on effective practices and model programs for statewide improvement of services to students with disabilities. Increase dissemination of information about: 1) resources for obtaining specialized materials and assistive technology, 2) extended school year services, and 3) positive academic and behavior supports.
- Continue to explore opportunities to provide joint training for both school personnel and parents. Topics such as curriculum adaptations, accommodations, understanding the regulations and inclusive practices will increase the level of support to students with disabilities.

Virginia's special education improvement plan has mechanisms in place for local school divisions to build their capacity and maintain effective practices to strive for better ways of educating all students, including those with disabilities.