

# VIRGINIA STATE SPECIAL EDUCATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE (SSEAC)

ANNUAL REPORT

JULY 2019 – JUNE 2020

## INTRODUCTION

The *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA 2004) requires that each state establish and maintain a state advisory panel for the purpose of providing policy guidance with respect to special education and related services for children with disabilities in the state. The federal regulations specify membership and require that a majority of members be individuals with disabilities or parents of children with disabilities. Specifically, the regulations require the following membership include:

* parents of children with disabilities (ages birth through 26);
* individuals with disabilities;
* teachers;
* representatives of institutions of higher education that prepare special education and related services personnel;
* state and local education officials, including officials who carry out activities under subtitle B of title VII of the *McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act* (42 U.S.C. 11431 *et seq.*);
* administrators of programs for children with disabilities;
* representatives of other State agencies involved in the financing or delivery of related services to children with disabilities;
* representatives of private schools and public charter schools;
* not less than one representative of a vocational, community, or business organization concerned with the provision of transition services to children with disabilities;
* a representative from the State child welfare agency responsible for foster care; and
* representatives from the State juvenile and adult corrections agencies.

Refer to the IDEA 2004 implementing regulations at 34 CFR § 300.167 through 34 CFR
§ 300.169 and the *Regulations Governing Special Education Programs for Students with Disabilities in Virginia* (the Virginia Regulations) at 8VAC20-81-20 15.a (1) through (11).

In Virginia, the panel is known as the State Special Education Advisory Committee (SSEAC). This report serves to confirm that the SSEAC membership for the 2019-2020 operational year satisfied the requirements of the above-referenced regulations.

## COMMITTEE ORGANIZATION

The activities of the Virginia State Special Education Advisory Committee (SSEAC) are governed by the Virginia Board of Education (BOE) bylaws for advisory committees. The SSEAC year commences on July 1 and ends on June 30 of the following calendar year. Committee members work with the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) staff in establishing priorities and agenda items for SSEAC meetings. The SSEAC delegates various subcommittees to monitor programmatic issues and future items of concern.

## STANDING SUBCOMMITTEES

Five standing subcommittees are used to conduct much of the work of the SSEAC. These include Executive, Nominating, Policy and Regulations, Student Achievement and Student Outcomes, and Family Engagement and Community Outreach. The five subcommittees are consistent with the priorities of the Assistant Superintendent for Special Education and Student Services, and the SSEAC supports the VDOE’s focus on these priorities.

The SSEAC members are each assigned to subcommittees based upon each member’s expertise, interests, and concerns. Each subcommittee is chaired by a member of the executive committee. Subcommittees make recommendations to the full committee. Such recommendations may result in further study with additional information from the VDOE, presentations to the SSEAC, or inclusion in the SSEAC’s Annual Report to the BOE. The VDOE personnel serve as consultants to each of the subcommittees, providing technical assistance, clarification of VDOE policies and procedures, and additional information.

* **Executive -** The Executive Subcommittee includes the Chair, Vice Chair, Secretary, and three At-large members. The committee establishes priorities for meeting agendas and provides overall direction to the SSEAC.
* **Nominating -** The Nominating Subcommittee is charged with nominating a slate of nominations for Executive Subcommittee vacancies.
* **Policy and Regulations -** This subcommittee focuses on initiatives at the state level that either result in policy and regulations or have an impact on policy and regulations as they pertain to students with disabilities.
* **Student Achievement and Student Outcomes -** This subcommittee focuses on achievement and outcome data, goals under the state plan for students with disabilities, transition planning, and best practices. The purpose of this subcommittee is to identify and make recommendations to the VDOE.
* **Family Engagement and Community Outreach -** This subcommittee provides recommendations to the VDOE on Family Engagement and Community Outreach best practice. Educating parents, students, and schools/community partners on how to strengthen relationships and how to support one another in the education of students with disabilities.

## MEETINGS

The full committee meets in regular session at least four times annually. Subcommittees meet during the regular sessions and as necessary to fulfill their responsibilities to the SSEAC. Every effort is made to consolidate the work of subcommittees with the regular sessions. All meetings and work sessions are open to the public. The public is offered an opportunity to make comment during a specified time allotted in the agenda at each regular meeting.

During the 2019-2020 year, meetings were held in the Richmond area on the following dates:

* October 3-4, 2019
* December 5-6, 2019
* March 12-13, 2020
* July 16, 2020 (virtual)

Meeting dates scheduled for the remainder of 2020 are:

* October 8-9, 2020
* December 3-4, 2020

## PRESENTATIONS

Each meeting included presentations, updates on the status of numerous projects, state and federal legislation, funding initiatives, and other information related to services for students with disabilities. These presentations provided the basis for much of the subcommittee work as well as the desire to have additional presentations on specific topics.

**The following topics were presented by the VDOE staff or other community stakeholders:**

* Assistant Superintendent’s Reports of the VDOE Activities
* *Virginia Freedom of Information Act*
* Annual Dispute Resolution Report
* Update on the State Systemic Improvement Plan (SSIP)
* Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP) Update
* Private School Progress Monitoring Outcomes Update
* Transition University Presentation
* Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) Presentation
* Indicator 13: Secondary IEP Goals and Transition Services and Indicator 14: Postsecondary Outcomes Presentation
* Inclusion Project Update - 3Cs (Culture, Collaboration, Coaching)
* Students with Disabilities Discipline Data Review
* Military Service Requirements and Individuals with Disabilities
* New Virginia Community School Framework (VCSF) Initiative
* Annual Plan Applications
* Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), Partnership for People with Disabilities, Center for Family Involvement Outreach Activities
* Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center (PEATC) Outreach Activities Briefing
* Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC) Virginia Special Education Audit Briefing
* Private School Licensure/Monitoring Procedures
* Education and Stability for Kids in Foster Care/Homelessness

## PUBLIC COMMENTS

A public comment period was held at each meeting. The SSEAC members appreciate the time and effort of Virginia citizens to attend or provide a written narrative of their commentary for presentation at meetings to ensure their voices are heard. During the 2019-2020 year, the SSEAC heard commentary on the following topics:

* Eligibility process
* Discipline/expulsion/suspension over representation of low-income students, African American students, students with disabilities, and immigrant children
* Foster care over representation of students with disabilities

## ISSUES IDENTIFIED THROUGH CONSTITUENCY REPORTS

Each member of the SSEAC was provided an opportunity at the SSEAC meetings to report on activities and issues from their constituency groups. During the 2019-2020 year, the following concerns were shared through each SSEAC member’s constituency report and are grouped by topic area as indicated:

* Teacher shortages, concerns, retention, pay, burnout, recruitment, support
* Early student training on post-secondary options and considerations
* Parent and community involvement
* Critical decision points
* Least restrictive environment (LRE) - Inclusion
* Transition
* Discipline, restraint/seclusion
* *Children’s Services Act* (CSA) funding and regional training centers

## RECOGNITIONS

During the March 13, 2020, meeting, the SSEAC recognized Mrs. Heidi Lawyer for her seven years of service; Mrs. Catherine King for her six years of service; and Mr. Cameron Wilmer for his three years of service on the State Special Education Advisory Committee. All received certificates to recognize their services to the children of the Commonwealth.

## COMMENDATIONS

The SSEAC wishes to acknowledge the herculean measures that were undertaken by both the VBOE and the VDOE after schools across the Commonwealth were closed under Executive Order for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year. During the pandemic the VDOE staff worked tirelessly to produce and provide a variety of resources and information through its website, the VDOE staff maintained regular communications with local schools divisions, they advocated for waivers at the federal level, and they continually updated a COVID-19 FAQ’s page to keep families informed. The VDOE invested in initiatives to develop online resources that promoted total inclusive school programming and made available the Virtual Virginia platform free to teachers. The efforts of the VDOE, VBOE, and the Secretary of Education have not gone unnoticed by the SSEAC.

SSEAC would like to recognize and thank the Assistant Superintendent of Special Education and Student Services, Dr. Samantha Hollins and her team for keeping children with disabilities a priority during the closure. Additionally, we would like to commend the VBOE and the VDOE on the following accomplishments of this past administrative year:

1. Multiple workgroups and task forces who addressed safety, learning, and the return to school for children across the Commonwealth.
2. For an eighth consecutive year, Virginia has earned the U.S. Department of Education’s highest rating for improving outcomes for students with disabilities and for compliance with the federal *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA).
3. Supporting the “Virginia is for Learners Initiative” which promotes deeper learning, equity in education, the five C’s, and the Profile of the Virginia Graduate.
4. Supporting special education teachers beyond the first year through a partnership with the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC).
5. Purchasing Virtual Job Shadowing licenses for school systems to use at no cost for students with disabilities.
6. Implementing the option to sign-up for information updates from the GovDelivery system where the VDOE shared instructional resources, professional development support, and information for families directly with stakeholders.
7. The VDOE’s support of the Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center (PEATC) Transition University platform which is designed to educate families, teachers, and self-advocates available opportunities and resources for students transitioning to a post-secondary life.

The SSEAC would like to recognize the ongoing opportunities, partnerships, and initiatives for the last several years by the VBOE.

1. Innovative opportunities through career awareness, prevocational and vocational training courses and programs that have included I’m Determined, MOVE Youth Institute, Project SEARCH, ACE-IT in College, Start on Success, and CTE courses that help students earn credentials, life ready skills, and improve post-secondary outcomes.
2. Aspiring Special Education Leadership Academy (ASELA), which assists school divisions and state-operated programs with succession planning by preparing potential leaders for future administrative positions in special education.
3. Partnerships with: The Virginia Board for People with Disabilities (VBPD), Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center (PEATC), the Center for Family Involvement (CFI), the Center for Transition Innovations (CTI), and the Autism Center for Excellence (ACE) all of which utilize their programming strengths to support collaboration with families, schools, and advocates, by providing information and training.
4. Virginia Tiered Systems of Support (VTSS) and Training and Technical Assistance Centers (TTAC); Assistive Technology Network of VA Lending Library.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic closing schools, the SSEAC had identified the continuing need to improve opportunities for students with disabilities to be educated alongside their peers without disabilities, in the least restrictive environment. The SSEAC looked more closely at discipline data among students with disabilities, and more notable the disproportionate discipline towards students of color with disabilities. The SSEAC identified the need to support the whole child by providing social-emotional learning and improving family engagement. Funding for Virginia’s public education should be adequate to ensure that every student in the Commonwealth has an equal opportunity to become a high-performing, “life-ready” citizen.

The worldwide pandemic has exacerbated existing inequities within the Commonwealth. Students with disabilities, English language learners, low-income families, and limited internet access households are among the most marginalized populations. Learning was significantly altered due to the school closures and highlighted challenges for students with disabilities and their parents, families, and caregivers engaging in and for school divisions providing virtual education and supports. As school divisions begin to prepare for the new school year, there is still much that needs considered when addressing the needs of all students.

Students with disabilities must continue to remain a priority as schools return to learning. Based on the above observations, public comments, reports from members representing their constituency groups, and other information presented to the committee, the SSEAC makes the following recommendations to the VBOE:

1. Continue efforts to address the teacher, staff, and other professional support shortages, by:
* Exploring available funding resources and partnerships.
* Reviewing teacher licensure and application process, i.e., cost, review time, and PRAXIS requirements.
* Investigating the release of grant awards prior to the fall semester for students enrolled in teacher preparation college courses.
* Pursuing innovative partnerships (with institutes of higher education and local school divisions) and support of early career professionals to attain licensure, support retention and provide high quality professional development and technical assistance. These endeavors will facilitate the expansion of programs like *The Journey Into Teaching Academy (JITA)*, which currently focuses on newer teachers maintaining their license and staying in place.
1. Provide local school divisions with additional resources and supports needed to further promote social-emotional learning (SEL) and enhance connections for students and families created through existing initiatives. Such as SEL standards development, grants and partnerships between community mental health providers, and local school divisions to build school-based mental health programs, Virginia Tiered Systems of Support (VTSS), and promoting behavioral health redesign. Development of these services should focus on ensuring that students and families can access them in-person or through virtual learning alternatives.
2. Continue initiatives by supporting the development of online resources that promote total inclusive school programming and more in-depth trainings for school personnel that cover:
* Special education regulations, to include transition, targeted specifically for school building administrators.
* Transition beginning in elementary through post-secondary choices.
* Advanced online modules for dyslexia that go into more detail than the current module required for teacher licensure.
* Critical Decision Points modules in other languages.
1. Support efforts of higher education by encouraging partnerships and expanding programs that make permanent the focus on universal design that has been required in the COVID-19 pandemic.

## CONCLUSION

The SSEAC appreciates the opportunity to present these recommendations to the Virginia Board of Education. We recognize the impacts of the pandemic have put an exhaustive strain on everyone. It is our hope that the VBOE will keep students with disabilities a priority by considering and implementing the recommendations, as deemed appropriate, without a delay. We look forward to working alongside the Virginia Department of Education and the Virginia Board of Education.