

June 8, 2023

Dear Dr. Kay-Wyatt, Chair Alderton & Alexandria City School Board Members,

Over the past six months, the Alexandria PTA Council (PTAC)'s Special Education Committee brought together parents and caregivers to discuss special education in Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS) with the goal of soliciting recommendations on ways to enhance special education services in the city. The meetings included guest speakers from ACPS, including from the Office of Specialized Instruction.

While the group applauded efforts like the partnership with George Washington University to strengthen hiring, the group was unanimous in its conclusion that special education students and their families face too many barriers to receiving a free and appropriate public education in Alexandria. The consequences of these barriers are all too evident in ACPS data. The dropout rate among special education students, for example, has increased from two to five percent since 2020 while graduation rates among every other student subgroup in Alexandria rise. Meanwhile, at the halfway point in the 2022-2023 school year, only 23 percent of special education students scored in the 40th percentile or higher on MAP Language Arts testing, and only 17 percent scored in the 40th percentile or higher in MAP Math testing.

Alexandria can and must do better. ACPS must go beyond talking points to truly prioritize special education students. PTAC implores ACPS to take the following steps, as recommended by special education parents and caregivers, to ensure that every student with a disability succeeds in Alexandria.

Enhance Communication with Families. Communication between ACPS and families receiving special education services must be strengthened. Parents and caregivers should, at a minimum, expect an introductory email or letter from all related service providers detailing their name, email address and phone number, so that parents can communicate with their child's team. During the 2022-23 school year, many parents reported knowing neither their therapist names nor even if their child was receiving the services detailed in their IEP. If related service providers are unable to provide services, parents must be informed of the absence and how the service minutes will be made up.

Poor communication and lapses in service have significant consequences. A parent of a non-verbal child told PTAC's Special Education Committee that they were working with their health insurance and a specialized vendor to obtain an augmentative communication device for their child. The child is unable to finish the process because their school speech therapist departed on planned long-term leave without providing necessary paperwork prior to the leave. This child, who is moving over the summer, will have no means of communication and will never be able to make up the service time they missed due to this absence.

Parents need timely, entry-level information from every school as they orient themselves to the special education process, as well as ongoing updates about services provided. While we appreciate the tireless efforts of the Parent Resource Center staff, construction at the Minnie Howard campus makes it very difficult to access their office and lending library.

ACPS must also keep parents and caregivers informed of when services are not provided to students, and help them to understand what recourse they have to receive compensatory services. PTAC urges ACPS to:

- Update its website to include comprehensive information about special education services and how to access them;
- Elevate the Parent Resource Center and provide commensurate resources to enable it to serve as a hub for general information on the special education process;
- Ensure all service providers – to include speech, occupational therapy, and physical therapy – make at a minimum initial contact with parents (e.g. via Parent Square, email, or letter) to help parents identify their child's therapist for the school year; and,
- Hold teachers at the secondary level accountable for updating Canvas with assignments, and grading schoolwork in a timely manner, to ensure that students with executive functioning challenges and their families are better able to address missing assignments.

Provide a Truly Inclusive Education. ACPS must commit to providing a truly inclusive education for all students from pre-K through high school. Students with disabilities are consistently falling behind their peers, and often not graduating. This is exacerbated by the segregation these students face, particularly at the secondary level.

- Segregated classrooms in a secluded wing have no place in education today. ACPS should ensure that students with disabilities are integrated into general education classrooms for the benefit of all students.
- ACPS should embrace and elevate inclusive best practices throughout the school division, from pre-K to post-graduate work.

Raise Expectations for Students with Disabilities. ACPS should ensure that students with disabilities receive an appropriately challenging education. Too many parents and caregivers assess that students with disabilities in ACPS are subject to expectations that are too low, and may serve to reinforce student fears about their intellectual potential. At ACPS there is an implicit understanding that students with certain disabilities are funneled into an Applied Studies Diploma track, without ever having the opportunity to participate in a general education core class with the support. ACPS should provide instruction that is at or closely aligned to grade-level standards. Executive functioning and organization skills are essential to future success and should be explicitly taught in the classroom.

While career preparation is an essential component of special education services, ACPS needs to move beyond the worn-out “Food, Filth and Flowers” training such as the “career prep” elective at GWMS last year that had students cleaning the library and picking up trash, for example. Students with disabilities need support in following their passions in the working world and should not be limited by the interests of the teaching staff. Surely cosmetology, auto-shop and child development classes can be made accessible to these students?

The ACPS Students with Disabilities Evaluation Report concluded that in 2018, “without an appropriate allocation of resources, mandated professional development, and clear, non-negotiable, accountability measures...” the division’s services for students with disabilities would stagnate. Five years and a worldwide pandemic later, special education services did not just stagnate in Alexandria, they regressed. ACPS must act now with urgency to address and eliminate the barriers that prevent every student with a disability from succeeding in Alexandria.



PTAC appreciates your consideration of these special education priorities.

Thank you,

Alexandria PTA Council Executive Board 2022-2023

Missy Estabrook, President
Betty Cook, Treasurer
Linda Williams, Secretary
Sally Hunnicutt, VP of Advocacy
Julia Sylla, VP of Programs
Staci Rijal, VP of Communications
D Ohlandt, VP of Outreach
Maureen McNulty, Past President
Dena Penner, Special Education Parent Liaison
Greta Gordon, Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Co-Chair
Mariam Fikre, Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Co-Chair