

# Evaluation of Services for Students with Disabilities and Those Requiring Intervention

## Arlington Public Schools

Executive Summary

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## I. Purpose of the Study and Methodology

Arlington Public Schools (APS) contracted with the Public Consulting Group (PCG) to provide a comprehensive assessment of services to students with disabilities and those receiving intervention supports. The assessment involved an examination of the effectiveness and efficacy of APS policies, procedures and practices concerning: the use of Intervention Assistance Teams (IATs) and the implementation of Arlington Tiered System of Supports (ATSS), special education services provided under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and supplementary aids and services provided under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Section 504). This review builds upon the previous 2013 evaluation, also completed by PCG, and focuses on both the current, overall effectiveness of these programs and the progress made toward recommendations from the prior evaluation.

The full report describes the current state of these initiatives and is organized to guide APS toward continuous improvement. It examines the following evaluation questions:

1. **Evaluation and Identification Practices.** How, and to what extent, does APS evaluate and identify students who may require additional supports, services, interventions, and accommodations?
2. **Delivery of Services, Accommodations, and Instruction.** How, and to what extent, does APS provide services, accommodations, and instruction for students based on identification of needed services?
3. **Resource Allocation.** How, and to what extent, are resources organized to consistently implement the processes for: a) Evaluating and identifying b) Providing services, accommodations, and instruction?
4. **Academic Rigor and Engagement.** How, and to what extent, are students identified with an IEP or 504 Plan challenged and engaged?
5. **Social and Emotional Learning.** How, and to what extent, are students with disabilities and those requiring intervention supports supported to develop socially and emotionally?
6. **Access and Equity.** How, and to what extent, do students with disabilities and those requiring intervention supports have the opportunity to engage in the school experience equitably?
7. **High Quality Staff.** How, and to what extent, are students with disabilities and those requiring intervention supports serviced by high-quality staff and service providers across all settings?
8. **Parents and Family Engagement.** How, and to what extent, is support available for parents and families of students with disabilities and those requiring intervention supports?

All areas of the report are focused on improving instructional outcomes and providing an inclusive culture for students with disabilities and those requiring intervention supports. It begins with the student-centered focus of teaching/learning and progresses to examine the ways in which APS operates to support this essential function. It is intentionally structured in this manner in order to group interrelated topics together.

### Methodology

Over the course of the 2018-19 school year, PCG conducted a mixed-methods evaluation of the IAT, ATSS, 504 Plan, and IEP services for students.

The findings and recommendations related to programs, policies, and practices included in the report resulted from a comprehensive analysis of several data sources. Sources included 1) Data and Document Analysis, 2) Focus Groups and Interviews, 3) Student File Review Focus Groups, 4) Student Shadowing, 5) Staff and Parent Surveys. These components drew from Research and Practice Literature to inform the findings and recommendations. PCG used publicly available achievement and financial information to compare key APS statistics against local district/division, state, and national data. Details of each data source can be found in the final report.

## II. Strategic Initiatives and District Context

Arlington County is a diverse, dynamic, and professional community located across the Potomac River from Washington, D.C. The County has one school district, Arlington Public Schools (APS), which is the 13th largest among Virginia's 132 school divisions and educates over 27,000 students from early childhood through age 21. The most recent decade in APS history has been one of increasingly significant student growth, totaling nearly 9,000 students, or 49% growth.<sup>1</sup> APS students come from 122 nations and speak 100 languages, representing the following demographic composition: White (46.9%), Hispanic (28.0%), Black/African American (10.0%), Asian (9.1%), Multiple (5.7%), American Indian/Alaskan Native (0.3%), and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (0.1%). Approximately one-third (32.1%) of enrolled students are economically disadvantaged. English learners represent 29.9% of the population, 14.3% of students receive special education services, and 2.5% have 504 Plans.<sup>2</sup>

APS is recognized as one of the top performing school divisions in the state according to 2018 overall reading and mathematics advanced/proficient assessment rates, in both cases exceeding state averages,<sup>3</sup> and has received a wide range of accolades, including the prestigious Medallion of Excellence Award presented by the U.S. Senate, and Productivity and Quality Awards for Virginia and the District of Columbia. The 2017 Washington Post Challenge Index ranked all APS high schools in the top three percent in the U.S; for the eighth year in a row. Fifteen APS schools received 2016 Virginia Index of Performance awards for advanced learning and achievement. Further, since 2009, APS has decreased its dropout rate by almost two-thirds, or 52%. More than 95% of APS students earn one or more high school credits during middle school. APS offers a range of programs and services designed to address the complex educational, health-related, and social-emotional needs of its diverse student population and to prepare them for postgraduate success. APS frequently attracts families who move to the area specifically for its reputable programming.

The APS culture is one built on the notion of continuous improvement and transparency. As evidenced by the multiple program reviews occurring each year and the comprehensive Annual Report, APS is accustomed to self-reflection and actively strives to improve its programming. The APS website contains readily accessible data and offers a wide range of resource for parents and the community about new and ongoing initiatives.

Although APS recognizes the need to strengthen systems to ensure student academic success, especially for students with disabilities and those requiring intervention supports, it faces challenges in five key areas.

### **1) Reducing the opportunity gap by increasing academic rigor and inclusive opportunities**

The opportunity gap for students with disabilities in APS has persisted for the past several years. In the 2017-18 school year, 55% of students with disabilities passed the Standards of Learning (SOL) in Reading, compared to the 85% pass rate of their non-disabled peers. The Mathematics SOL scores were similar: a 55% pass rate for students with disabilities and 84% for all other students. Further, of the 61.0% of all students graduating with an Advanced Studies Diploma, only 23.1% were students with disabilities. APS has continued to lag behind state expectations for students with disabilities educated in the general education environment at least 80% of the time and has not met the state target for the past three years.

### **2) Implementing a comprehensive intervention support system for all students**

APS's recently finalized revised strategic plan for 2018-24, a holistic approach to educating all students, reflects its core focus areas: Multiple Pathways to Success for All Students; Healthy, Safe, and Supported

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.apsva.us/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Diversity-in-APS-Report-4page-accessible.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <http://schoolquality.virginia.gov/divisions/arlington-county-public-schools#desktopTabs-3>

<sup>3</sup> <http://schoolquality.virginia.gov/divisions/arlington-county-public-schools#desktopTabs-1>

Students; Engaged Workforce; Operational Excellence; and Strong and Mutually Supportive Partnerships. As APS begins to enact the recommendations in this report and the tenets of the strategic plan, serious consideration needs to be given to the level of autonomy schools can and should have when supporting programming for students and how district-wide initiatives such as the redesigned Student Support Process (SSP) will be implemented with fidelity. Achieving the goals established in the strategic plan will require an acceleration of the academic and social-emotional initiatives underway.

### ***3) Developing trusting and productive relationships with the parent and family community***

APS has an active parent and family community and offers many community engagement opportunities. A frequent theme that emerged with participants in the parent focus groups and in the parent surveys was that school staff working with their children are nurturing, caring, and supportive. Yet, an undercurrent of distrust of APS as a whole remains. Building stronger and more trusting relationships with the parent community, particularly for non-native English speakers or disenfranchised, will require even greater transparency and a concerted effort.

### ***4) Providing consistent services in all schools***

APS operates under a site-based management model, which has a significant impact on the consistency of programming from school to school district-wide. Striking a balance between school level decision making and the cohesiveness and standardization required to ensure high quality service delivery in all schools will require finesse and a nuanced approach.

### ***5) Leadership changes***

As of the finalization of this report in Fall 2019, APS is facing significant changes in leadership in three key positions: Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent of Teaching and Learning, and Special Education Director. As new personnel start in these positions, it will be critical that they understand the intent of this report and organize the human capital and financial resources necessary to carry out the recommendations provided here.

## **Summary and Implications**

APS has launched several new initiatives in the past few years to begin to address some of the areas of growth, including establishing a strategic mission and vision, launching the Teaching and Learning Framework, building an inclusive culture, and creating a Student Support Process. It will be critical for APS, especially its new leadership team, to maintain this course in order to both implement the recommendations contained in this report, realize its vision, and carry forward with system improvements.

## II. Summary of Strengths and Opportunities for Improvement

The following section highlights the strengths and opportunities for improvement in each area reviewed as part of this evaluation.

### ATSS Practices

Strengths	Opportunities for Improvement
<p><b>Vision.</b> There is an established vision for ATSS and strong awareness and support for this vision amongst APS staff.</p> <p><b>Coordinator Position.</b> The ATSS Supervisor position is viewed as supportive and providing effective guidance.</p> <p><b>Collaboration.</b> There is strong collaboration across the Department of Teaching and Learning to implement ATSS.</p> <p><b>Universal Screening.</b> Implementation of universal screening.</p> <p><b>Reading Interventions.</b> Reading interventions are centralized and standardized.</p> <p><b>Elementary Schools.</b> ATSS is most robust at the elementary level.</p> <p><b>Centralized Forms.</b> Recent move to web-based forms in effort to standardize practice.</p>	<p><b>Accountability.</b> No established accountability or metrics for principals to encourage ATSS adoption.</p> <p><b>Referral.</b> Many PLCs did not have a systematic way of identifying students to move to IAT team review.</p> <p><b>Social-Emotional Interventions.</b> School-wide behavior frameworks are at the discretion of each school. Tier 2 and Tier 3 behavior interventions viewed as lacking.</p> <p><b>Math Interventions.</b> Guidance related to math interventions is limited.</p> <p><b>Technology.</b> Updates to Synergy could better improve utility.</p> <p><b>Inconsistent Practices.</b> ATSS implementation continues to be a school-based decision, leading to inconsistent practices across buildings.</p> <p><b>Naming.</b> There is ongoing confusion between IAT and ATSS and the role of and differences between each one at the school-level.</p> <p><b>Communication with families.</b> Families do not appear to have a strong understanding of ATSS.</p> <p><b>Secondary Schools.</b> Implementation weakest in the middle and high schools.</p> <p><b>District-level Policies and Procedures.</b> Lack of school board policies and procedure manual on ATSS have contributed to inconsistencies.</p> <p><b>Progress Monitoring.</b> Schools appear to be inconsistent in their use of data to inform student support decisions.</p>

### Summary and Implications

In the past five years, there has been significant progress in providing interventions to students who may need additional supports. APS has set the vision for and implemented a tiered framework known as ATSS, that is supported through the IAT process. The district level ATSS Supervisor position is a strength for APS. School-based staff reported understanding and valuing ATSS. However, there is the perception among stakeholders that accountability for ATSS remains lacking. The ATSS Supervisor can provide the vision, plans, tools and resources but cannot hold schools accountable for implementation fidelity. Creating an effective intervention and pre-referral system requires dedicated support from senior-level leadership, universal expectations, and accountability structures to ensure a seamless and integrated framework that is clear to central office leadership, school leadership teams and parents.

## Referral and Eligibility

Strengths	Opportunities for Improvement
<p><b>Evaluation Process.</b> Most staff believe evaluations conducted through the special education process are sufficiently comprehensive to identify students' specific strengths and needs.</p> <p><b>Parent Understanding of IEP.</b> Most parents feel that APS staff explained special education services in an understandable way.</p> <p><b>ESOL/HILT Checklist.</b> A comprehensive ESOL/HILT checklist exists to help staff differentiate between a language or a learning need.</p> <p><b>Ease of 504 Eligibility Process.</b> In general, parents appreciated found the eligibility process for Section 504 to be straightforward and collaborative.</p>	<p><b>IEP Referrals by Subgroup:</b> Students who are identified as economically disadvantaged are more likely to be found eligible for special education services.</p> <p><b>504 Referrals by Subgroup:</b> Students who are identified as economically disadvantaged or an English Learner are less likely to be referred and found eligible for a 504 Plan than their peers.</p> <p><b>504 Referrals by School:</b> There is significant variability of 504 Plans referral rates amongst secondary schools.</p> <p><b>504 Referrals by Grade:</b> There is a significant spike in referrals to a 504 Plan in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade.</p>

## Summary and Implications

Referral rates shed light into District practices that may impact how students are found eligible for services. There was some variability among IEP distribution rates particularly for students identified as economically disadvantaged. There was a larger number of discrepancies for students with 504 Plans that warrant a deeper review of referral and eligibility policies and practices in APS. Data that indicate the need to further review are highlighted below:

- **IEP race/ethnicity.** Asian students make up a larger overall population (9.2%) in APS than those referred (4.7%). Hispanic student referral rates (31.9%) are higher than the overall APS population (28.2%)
- **IEP economically disadvantaged.** Students who were identified as economically disadvantaged accounted for 39.2% of students found eligible for special education. These numbers are slightly higher than the overall district student population, where 32% of students are considered economically disadvantaged.
- **Section 504 race/ethnicity.** 65.7% of students referred for a 504 Plan were White. White students account for 45% of the overall district population.
- **Section 504 economically disadvantaged.** Students identified as economically disadvantaged only accounted for 8.4% of 504 referrals, compared to the overall district average of 32%.
- **Section 504 variability by grade and school.** The largest number of students referred for a 504 Plan was in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, with referral rates substantially higher at some high schools than others.
- **Section 504 Gifted.** Students identified as gifted accounted for 29.1% of students referred for a 504 Plan. This is higher than APS's population, where 25% of students are identified as gifted.
- **Section 504 English Learner.** Only 5.9% of students with a 504 Plan are English Learners. 30% of all students in APS are English Learners.

## Special Education: Administration and Implementation

Strengths	Opportunities for Improvement
<p><b>Teaching and Learning Framework.</b> Development and implementation of framework supports the vision for inclusion.</p> <p><b>Pre-K Inclusive Options.</b> APS has comprehensive, inclusive Pre-K programs.</p> <p><b>Countywide Programs.</b> APS has a wide range of countywide programs at select schools to support students in need of specialized programs.</p> <p><b>Assistive Technology (AT).</b> APS has a knowledgeable AT team with clear policies and procedures, uses the SETT Framework to guide the assessment process of students, and provides access to low- and high-tech devices based on need.</p> <p><b>Enhanced Policies, Procedures and Support for EL SWDs.</b> The APS Educational Checklist and Suggested Adaptations Guide was expanded, along with the investment in a cadre of HILT resource teachers available, to support EL SWDs in the general education setting.</p> <p><b>Post-Secondary Transition.</b> APS has a variety of post-secondary transition programs that offer students opportunities to prepare them for the workforce or further education.</p> <p><b>Caring and Supportive Staff.</b> Parents noted how special educators act with kindness and serve as advocates for students with disabilities.</p> <p><b>Policies and Procedures.</b> A new Student Support Manual is replacing the special education manual and is being implemented in the 2019-20 school year.</p>	<p><b>Early Childhood.</b> Continued need to improve EC outcomes and expand continuum of services.</p> <p><b>Implementation Guide for Inclusion.</b> Beyond the Teaching and Learning Framework, APS does not have a clearly articulated implementation guide, use common terminology, or provide guidance or expectations around scheduling for inclusive practices.</p> <p><b>Academic Optimism and Growth Mindset.</b> These concepts are not readily known to staff or put into practice consistently for all students, especially those with disabilities.</p> <p><b>Inconsistent Practices.</b> Service delivery is inconsistent and have great variability between schools.</p> <p><b>Staff Knowledge and IEP Implementation.</b> Staff knowledge varies between schools and programs, leading to variances in IEP implementation.</p> <p><b>Data.</b> Staff do not consistently review State Performance Plan (SPP) data, or other district specific data relevant sources, to determine patterns and trends, monitor implementation strategies, or help inform continuous improvement efforts.</p> <p><b>Goal Progress.</b> There is no systematic way for schools and the central office to track progress made toward IEP goal mastery or trend analysis available on goal progress across schools and/or student types.</p> <p><b>Access to Advanced Courses.</b> Limited access for students with disabilities to advanced courses.</p> <p><b>Performance on Standards of Learning.</b> Students with disabilities in APS perform higher than the state average on reading and math Standards of Learning (SOLs) but below district and state averages for students without disabilities.</p> <p><b>Support for English Learners.</b> Pursuant to the recent Department of Justice settlement agreement, APS needs to fulfill the requirements specific to students with disabilities.</p> <p><b>Support for Twice Exceptional Learners.</b> Schools need additional support understanding how to provide services to meet the needs of twice exceptional learners.</p> <p><b>Parent and Family Engagement.</b> The relationship between school staff and parents is fractured in some schools and supports for non-native English-speaking parents require strengthening.</p> <p><b>Accountability.</b> There does not seem to be an established system of accountability that aligns with APS policies and procedures and sets a vision for high</p>

	<p>expectations, greater consistency, compliance, and results.</p> <p><b>Post-Secondary Transition.</b> Parents need greater understanding of IEP transition goals and diploma options.</p>
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## Summary and Implications

APS has a strong foundation on which to build and further strengthen its special education program. Students with disabilities in APS outperform the state proficiency averages for reading and math SOLs and maintain a higher graduation rate than their peer students with disabilities statewide. The Teaching and Learning Framework establishes a vision for inclusion and begins to identify resources to support its implementation. Yet, in order for APS to develop a consistent, high quality special education program in **every** school, further close the opportunity gaps, and prepare students with disabilities for post-secondary success, it must begin to operate as a school system, rather than a system of schools. School leadership need clear guidance around what they can expect to receive in terms of support from OSE and what decisions they have the authority to make (versus policies or procedures to which they must abide). Special educators need robust professional learning opportunities and training, a keen understanding of and coaching support to implement specially designed instruction and interventions with fidelity for all students with IEPs, and a consistent approach to data collection, progress monitoring, and trend analysis review. By establishing a system of accountability that aligns with its policies and procedures and sets a vision for high expectations, greater consistency, compliance, and results, APS will create a robust special education program.

## Section 504

Strengths	Opportunities for Improvement
<p><b>Increased Awareness.</b> School staff and parents are generally more aware of the 504 process since the 2013 review and actively use 504 Plans to support students.</p> <p><b>Policy and Procedure Manual.</b> School staff referenced the usefulness of the original 504 manual and that it has been updated routinely. As a result, staff believe policies and procedures related to Section 504 have been clearly established.</p> <p><b>Knowledgeable and Supportive Staff.</b> On a whole, parents commented that the staff with whom they worked were knowledgeable about their children’s needs and compassionate toward them.</p> <p><b>Parent Voice.</b> A large percentage (90%) of parent respondents indicated that they felt they were a valued member of the 504 team and that their opinions were respected.</p> <p><b>Electronic Documentation.</b> 504 Plans are now consistently developed electronically, allowing APS to run reports on which students have 504 Plans and what type of accommodations they receive.</p>	<p><b>Disparate Identification Practices.</b> Over two-thirds of students with 504 Plans are White. Nearly one-third are also identified as gifted. Identification rates are higher at the secondary level.</p> <p><b>Inconsistency of Service Delivery.</b> How accommodations are decided and implemented vary from school to school. There is a perception that policies and procedures are adhered to inconsistently.</p> <p><b>Monitoring Fidelity of 504 Plan Implementation.</b> There is no consistent method for tracking the efficacy or implementation of accommodations or a routine approach to sharing information with parents.</p> <p><b>Health Plans.</b> There is confusion among school staff as to when a student should receive a health plan and/or a 504 Plan and who provides the health accommodations listed.</p> <p><b>Plan Access.</b> Access to 504 Plans seemed to vary by school and staff member.</p>

## Summary and Implications

APS has made some positive strides with implementing the Section 504 recommendations from the 2013 PCG report. Specifically, APS added an electronic tracking system through Synergy and developed a policy and procedure manual that is known and utilized by staff. There is also a greater awareness of how Section 504 can be used to support students, with the percentage of students receiving 504 support increasing from 1.0% in 2010-11 to 2.5% in 2017-18.

Yet, additional opportunities for growth exist. The previous report noted that participants believed the appropriate consideration and usage of Section 504 was limited, with consideration for eligibility most often occurring when parents brought in outside evaluations. There was also concern that this circumstance frequently involves relatively high performing students and that similar advocacy does not exist for lower performing students with less involved parents. During this 2019 review, PCG found that while APS has developed more robust eligibility processes and staff more frequently considers using the 504 Plan as an appropriate support mechanism, it is still most common for parents to seek external evaluations to initiate the 504 evaluation process, especially at the secondary level. There continue to be inconsistencies across schools as to how accommodations are determined and provided, who has access to 504 Plans, and communication with parents as to the efficacy of their children’s accommodations. There needs to be a more in-depth examination of the differences (and overlap) between Health Plans and 504 Plans and clear and specific guidance on how to improve the handling of medical needs, given the serious concerns about how these accommodations are handled.

APS can build on its established foundation in several ways. With the predominance of white students with 504 Plans, APS needs to review its eligibility practices and analyze student demographic data, at the school and grade levels, to determine which students have qualified for 504 Plans and what trends exist

in these identification patterns. Monitoring the fidelity of 504 Plan implementation and sharing routine updates with parents are core components of ensuring students receive the appropriate, consistent supports to help them succeed. Further, given there is no dedicated 504 funding, it is critical that plans be reviewed periodically to assess their effectiveness and allocation of committed resources. APS also needs to establish, for a wide-range of school-based staff, mandatory professional learning opportunities. These should address, in part, understanding what effective accommodation implementation through a 504 Plan is.

## District Organization and Operations

Strengths	Opportunities for Improvement
<p><b>90 Day Progressive Plans.</b> Each school is required to have a 90 Day Plan that shows alignment between school goals and the APS Strategic Plan. Most school plans set goals for and monitor the academic progress of subgroups, initiatives related to social-emotional wellbeing, and parent/family engagement.</p> <p><b>Student Support Process.</b> The Department of Teaching and Learning provides oversight, coordination, and direction to the redesigned Student Support Process.</p> <p><b>Student Support Coordinators.</b> APS has developed a new position designed to enable a more coordinated support process for students with disabilities and those requiring intervention.</p> <p><b>Portfolio of Offices under the Department of Teaching and Learning.</b> APS has a unified department that coordinates the work of ATSS, Special Education, and Student Support Services, allowing for both a focus on academics and coordinated support for all students.</p> <p><b>Finances.</b> APS has benefited from a growing local economy and a cost sharing model with Arlington County. Focus group participants frequently indicated APS is well resourced.</p> <p><b>Dedicated Staff.</b> Focus group participants frequently praised the level of dedication of APS teachers and staff and support available for students.</p>	<p><b>90 Day Progressive Plan Goals.</b> Not all school plans have goals specific to all subgroup populations or action items to ensure high expectations for all students, coupled with appropriate supports, are included.</p> <p><b>Office of Special Education Organizational Structure.</b> There does not appear to be an intentional organizational design or a focus on organizing in the most effective manner to support schools and families.</p> <p><b>Cross-Departmental Collaboration.</b> Additional opportunities exist for cross-departmental communication and information sharing, as collaboration between offices has reportedly decreased.</p> <p><b>Planning Factors.</b> Planning Factors are not designed to support inclusive practices.</p> <p><b>Technology and Access to Data.</b> Inconsistent use of information systems to document supports for students, specifically interventions, 504 Plans, and IAT plans. This has resulted in an inability to produce accurate reports to drive decision making.</p>

## Summary and Implications

Over the past five years, APS has experienced many organizational changes specifically impacting students with disabilities and students requiring intervention. These changes have included significant growth in student enrollment (4.8% between 2016-17 to 2018-19), including increases in students with disabilities (9.6% over the same time period),<sup>4</sup> consolidation of the Office of Special Education (OSE) under the Department of Teaching and Learning, and changes in key leadership positions. Additionally, APS will implement the consolidation of 504, IAT, and Special Education support functions at the school level into a Student Support Coordinator role utilizing current staff.

Under the current structure, OSE operates with a lean staff to meet the objectives of the office. The OSE organizational structure appears to be primarily supporting processes, procedures, and compliance district-wide, with programmatic initiatives and instructional support for differentiated instruction being initiated and implemented at the school level. Given the site-based management model in APS, OSE is not currently structured to provide instructional support or best practices to schools. Instructional initiatives are primarily led through the Department of Teaching and Learning; however, there is no

<sup>4</sup> Data obtained from Arlington’s School Quality Report available at: [schoolquality.virginia.gov](http://schoolquality.virginia.gov)

requirement for schools to implement initiatives, and no method for evaluating effectiveness. The comprehensive Student Support Coordinator (SSC) role appears to focus primarily on building consistency in process and procedures with limited focus on providing cohesive and intentional support to teachers on differentiated instruction, co-teaching, or other instructional initiatives to support students.

While other school divisions have struggled with decreasing budgets over the years, APS has benefited from a growing local economy and cost sharing model with the County of Arlington. Although APS has seen increases in expenditures due to increased student enrollment, APS is overall well-resourced with teacher to student ratios (for teachers supporting students with disabilities) lower than comparative districts (based on available data) (9.2:1). Nationally, there is no consensus on the ideal student to teacher ratio for supporting students with disabilities, primarily because staffing decisions should be made based on programmatic and instructional priorities and practices and the supports required for providing students FAPE. The State of Virginia maintains caseload staffing requirements for disability categories and time a student receives special education.<sup>5</sup> Current APS planning factors appear to align with Virginia caseload staffing requirements.

To meet APS's strategic goal of at least 80% of students with disabilities spending 80% or more of their school day in a general education setting<sup>6</sup>, effective, high-yield co-teaching practices will be needed. To implement these practices district-wide, an effective teacher allocation and scheduling model will need to be in place. APS' planning factors currently do not account for inclusive practices. APS has not identified, prioritized, or required high-yielding co-teaching strategies across schools. A vision and implementation plan will need to be developed in order to inform planning factors.

Over the course of the next school year, APS will have a new, or interim, Superintendent, a new Assistant Superintendent for Teaching and Learning, and Director of Special Education. These changes in key leadership positions provide APS an opportunity to establish a strategic direction for the Office of Special Education and optimize its organizational structure to support strategic initiatives.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://law.lis.virginia.gov/admincode/title8/agency20/chapter81/section340/>

<sup>6</sup> APS Strategic Plan: <https://www.apsva.us/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/StrategicPlanTri-foldFINAL-10-26-18-front-back-print-short-side-1.pdf>

## Parent and Family Engagement

Strengths	Opportunities for Improvement
<p><b>Engaged parents.</b> ASEAC, SEPTA, and the Arlington Inclusion Task Force are active partners in the APS’s special education initiatives and serve as strong advocates for students and their families.</p> <p><b>Resources and information.</b> The Parent Resource Center (PRC) provides useful information and workshops for parents of students with disabilities including a comprehensive manual, the Special Education Family Resource and Information Guide. Awareness among parents of students with IEPs is high (91.3%).</p> <p><b>Special Education Parent Liaison Program.</b> It provides families with insider knowledge and support at the school level from people who have navigated the special education system.</p> <p><b>Training and Information Sessions.</b> Most parents who attend APS training and information sessions indicate that it was helpful for them (83.3% of parents of students with 504 Plans and 94.9% of parents of students with IEPs).</p> <p><b>Increased Outreach.</b> APS staff continue to seek out new methods to share information with APS families (e.g., telenovela on the IEP process).</p> <p><b>Plans to Support Students.</b> Overall parents report that they are considered partners in the development of IEPs (87.5%) and implementation of 504 Plans (81.2%).</p>	<p><b>Access for Families Whose First Language Is Not English.</b> APS provides translation and interpretation services, but families feel that they do not have the information or services needed.</p> <p><b>Expectations and Services.</b> A large proportion of parents of students with IEPs do not know or think none or only some teachers have high expectations for their child.</p> <p><b>Communication.</b> Parents report that communication breakdowns exist between school and home and district and home at all levels of schooling about IEP implementation, transitions, and student progress.</p> <p><b>Equity.</b> Parents report that special education services are not consistently available to all students and their families. They report that a gap exists between families that have access to external resources (such as testing) and can advocate for and obtain services for their children while others who rely on APS systems receive less support.</p> <p><b>Pace of Change.</b> Parents see limited change in the delivery of services/ addressing their concerns over multiple years. They sought updates on the previous 2013 review of special education and have sought legal recourse as a means to leverage measurable changes.</p>

## Summary and Implications

Since PCG’s review in 2013, outreach and communication from APS to support families of children with disabilities have continued to develop. Recommendations from the previous report included providing more parent friendly and informative materials at the school sites, using innovative ways to build parent confidence and advocacy skills through “mock IEP meetings,” and developing a guide for parents outlining the IEP process, terminology and frequently asked questions in document and video format with similar guides for 504 and IAT. Many of these recommendations have been implemented.

APS parent organizations, ASEAC and SEPTA, continue to be engaged partners with APS. Together with the Parent Resource Center and the Special Education Parent Liaison program, they provide families with information, resources, and an outlet to share their voice in APS. Training and information sessions are perceived of as helpful but parent awareness of these opportunities is uneven. Parents of children with IEPs are more likely to know about and attend APS events designed for parents of students with disabilities.

The majority of parents of students with 504 Plans and IEPs see themselves as partners in the development and implementation of students’ plans and report that they are satisfied with the information they receive on their child’s progress, but there is still a significant proportion of parents who do not feel

informed or that they have access to APS processes and services. A large proportion of parents perceive that their child's teachers do not have high expectations for them, or they don't know if they do.

Parents acknowledge improvement in APS' outreach efforts but there are opportunities for growth in all areas to assure that information systematically made available to all families using multiple channels and in multiple languages. APS may also wish to examine school-level outreach efforts to ensure that parents receive appropriate information and feel that they have access to resources and services.

## Student Experience

Strengths	Opportunities for Improvement
<p><b>Support from Teachers and Case Carriers.</b> In focus groups, high school students described case carriers and teachers who support them academically and socially as needs arise.</p> <p><b>Postsecondary Plans.</b> The majority of students with IEPs have talked with someone about what they want to do after graduating from high school (87%).</p> <p><b>School Climate and Culture.</b> Approximately 70% of students with IEPs and 80% of students with 504 Plans report that other students treat them fairly, and they feel welcomed, valued and respected in school most or all of the time.</p> <p><b>Independence.</b> The majority of students with IEPs (73%) and 504 Plans (73%) report that they are getting the skills that will help them be independent as possible after high school.</p>	<p><b>School Climate and Culture.</b> While the majority of students with IEPs report that they are able to participate in afterschool activities, that others treat them fairly, and they feel welcomed in school, nearly 30% report that this is not their experience.</p> <p><b>Students' Participation in IEP and 504 Process.</b> Students' participation in IEP meetings (44%), awareness of goals (59%), accommodations (56%), and progress toward goals (47%) is limited. Students participation in Section 504 meetings (44), awareness of the content of their plans (59%) was similarly limited.</p> <p><b>High Expectations.</b> More than a third of students with IEPs report that only some or none of their teachers have high expectations for them or that they don't know (35%).</p> <p><b>Understanding and Support.</b> A large proportion of students do not feel understood or supported: among students with IEPs, 37% report that some or none of their teachers understand and support them or that they don't know; and 44% report that some or no teachers talk with them about their progress. Among students with 504 Plans, 34% report that some or none of their teachers understand or support them or that they don't know. In focus groups students described ongoing self-advocacy as many teachers are not aware of or not providing accommodations.</p>

## Summary and Implications

Asking middle school and high school students about their experiences in APS school provides a range of insights about student's self-advocacy, school practices, and school climate and culture. First, most students indicated that they feel welcomed in school, are able to participate in after school activities, and are treated fairly by peers. The majority also report that they are developing the skills that will help them be independent after high school and have spoken with school staff about postsecondary plans. Many have participated in meetings to develop their IEP or 504 plans, feel comfortable asking questions during those meetings, feel that their opinion was considered, are aware of their accommodations and advocate for themselves as needed to inform teachers. They report responsive case carriers, and the majority note that teachers understand and support them.

There are, however, a large proportion of students who report a different experience. These students report that they do not feel welcomed in school, have not participated in the development of their IEP or 504 Plan, do not have conversations with staff about their plan, including their accommodations, or progress toward their goals. These students also do not feel understood or supported by their teachers.

As noted above, for students to thrive at school, they need to be provided with a safe and supportive environment. These findings present APS with opportunities to revisit school culture and climate at each school to ensure that all students feel welcome and all students feel they have a voice that is heard and considered. Staff within each school should examine operating cultural norms and practices to promote awareness of ways in which staff and students open or close academic and social opportunities for

students with disabilities and seek strategies to ameliorate the negative impact of these differential experiences of school can have. These conversations will necessarily integrate recommendations made elsewhere in this report regarding examining special education practices and school data to inform next steps.

### III. Guiding Principles

PCG has provided specific recommendations in five areas contained within the report: ATSS, Referral and Eligibility, Special Education, Section 504, and District Operations and Organization. Recommendations for parent and student engagement are incorporated under each of these sections.

Each set of recommendations are further categorized by the type of initiative, or guiding principle, required to complete it – developing the vision with district and school-based leaders, standardizing and implementing activities, creating data, monitoring, and accountability measures, offering professional learning opportunities, and engaging parents and students.

#### Vision and Leadership

Change requires a vision and the engagement of district and school leadership to carry it forward. When implementing the recommendations categorized under Vision and Leadership, APS should embed the following expectations into each one:

**Academic Optimism.** Build, promote and support a district wide culture that will help instill a value for academic optimism and growth mindset so that all the adults in the building share the responsibility for the achievement of every student, including those with disabilities. Presume that all students are competent and able and should be exposed to the highest levels of rigor.

**Uncompromised Instructional Focus.** Create an expectation regarding instruction that clearly communicates to school ls, and the broader community that a key focus of the Department of Teaching and Learning is to ensure that students with special needs make significant progress, to the greatest extent possible, in the general education curriculum, receive rigorous standards-aligned instruction, and experience the high quality delivery of interventions, differentiation, accommodations, modifications and specially designed instruction in every class.

#### Standards and Implementation

Without developing standards and establishing a core set of expectations, implementation of all initiatives will continue to be inconsistent across schools. The following guidance should be included for each set of recommendations related to standards and implementation.

**Strategy to Execution Action Plan.** Develop a detailed and transparent action plan to guide the implementation of the recommendations in this report and institute routine and public progress updates.

**Written Expectations.** Establish written expectations and incorporate all content information and expectations district and school personnel need to implement the Student Support framework. Consider including the following as the Student Support framework evolves.

##### *Public Access*

- Provide public access to the revised manual by posting the document on the APS webpage
- Provide links to available on-line resources.
- Train staff on the manual
- Regularly update it with current information and resources.

*Content.* Include criteria, procedures and practices for each area relevant to the implementation of these recommendations, e.g., criteria for child find; progress monitoring; referring students for a special education evaluation; inclusive instruction for preschool children; support for on-going needs of preschool children and school-aged students who are referred but are not evaluated or not qualified for services; expectations and tools to facilitate communication to teachers regarding the IEP specified needs of students in each of their classes; participation of general education teachers in IEP meetings; role of general/special education personnel in various circumstances, etc.

*Collaboration with Stakeholders.* Collaborate with preschool personnel, principals, other school-based groups, and ASEAC and SEPTA representatives to consider information and resource links that would be useful for each relevant group to include in the manual.

*Parents/Families.* In collaboration with local parent and advocacy groups, plan face-to-face training and on-line modules to provide parents an understanding of the information in the manual. If feasible, publish a modified document appropriate for parents and supplement it with one-page brochures to further access to this information. Ensure training is accessible to parents with diverse linguistic needs and sensory limitations.

### **Data, Monitoring, and Accountability**

The common phrase – “what gets measured, gets done” – applies for these recommendations and the actions APS needs to undertake. By establishing accountability metrics and creating data systems to monitor progress made, APS continue to improve its services for students with disabilities and those requiring intervention.

**Data Collection, Analysis & Reporting.** Develop key performance indicators (KPIs), data collection systems, and analysis to enable the superintendent and the senior leadership team, school level leadership teams, and department personnel to monitor the implementation of the recommendations in this report. Review and expand upon rubrics currently in use to have a universal set of documents that are relevant based on grade levels, student demographics, and types of schools.

**Monitoring & Accountability.** Reinforce the expectation that principals are responsible for overseeing ATSS, special education, Section 504 in their buildings, and that central office leadership hold principals accountable. Establish accountability factors relevant to central office personnel for their respective roles/responsibilities, in addition to expectations for other school-based staff. Evaluate the effectiveness, fidelity, and results of the implementation of the recommendations in this report, and include the following in the assessment:

*Data Checks.* Using KPIs, have the Department of Teaching and Learning host regular data conversations with school administrators and teachers to discuss results, anomalies, follow-up activities, and outcomes.

*Fidelity Assessments and Walk-Throughs.* Review current walk-through tools used to monitor instruction and interventions in general education and special education classes to see how students are being taught and how consistent instruction is across schools for students with disabilities. Initiate technical assistance, professional development, coaching, and mentoring to improve practices.

*Timely Communication and Feedback.* Design feedback loops at all levels to inform future work. Use this process to provide timely feedback to leadership teams about barriers that are beyond the control of local schools, and where these entities may require additional assistance.

*Performance Evaluations.* To the extent possible, modify performance evaluations to include components relevant to the implementation of ATSS, special education, and Section 504 programming when personnel have had access to training and materials necessary to carry out their expected roles.

*Central Office Support.* Be clear about the role of the central office in supporting the learning of students receiving intervention, special education, and Section 504 supports. Schools must be responsible and accountable for the teaching and learning process while the Department of Teaching and Learning's role is to provide adequate resources, clear guidance, and professional development, and support schools in the consistent and effective implementation of programs and services. Examine the current level of accountability in place for non-negotiable aspects of its ATSS, special education, and Section 504 policies and procedures to support the consistent implementation of district-level processes that have the greatest impact on student outputs, outcomes, and results. Determine what policies and procedures should be set by the central office and which schools have the authority to establish.

## **Professional Learning**

Quality teaching in all classrooms and skilled leadership in all schools will not occur by accident. It requires the intentional design and implementation of professional learning. High quality professional learning must be sustained, intensive, and classroom-focused (not one-day or short-term workshops or conferences) to have a positive and lasting impact on classroom instruction and teacher's performance.

Continued implementation of these components will be paramount:

**Professional Learning.** Adjust the District's Professional Learning Framework to address essential areas included in this report, ensuring the plan is targeted to different audiences, e.g., general educators, special educators, related service personnel, paraprofessionals, parents, etc. Ground training in the Learning Forward Standards for Professional Learning<sup>7</sup> and embed the following components:

*Mandatory Annual Trainings.* Because of the importance of principal leadership and the need for consistency between schools, establish a robust training plan for principals and other school-based administrators. Determine which trainings principals and other school-based administrators are required to attend each year and develop a process to ensure this happens.

*Cross-Functional Teams.* Cross-train individuals from different divisions/departments to maximize their knowledge and skills, and provide direct support, mentoring, coaching, and technical assistance to principals and teachers.

*High-Quality Trainers.* Ensure that all trainers are knowledgeable and effective. Identify and use exemplary school-based staff in addition to others.

*Access to Differentiated Learning.* Differentiate professional learning according to the audience's skills, experience, and need. Ensure that professional learning is engaging and differentiated based on individual skills, experience, and need. Have professional learning and technical assistance continue for new personnel and those needing additional support.

*Multiple Formats.* Use multiple formats (e.g., videos, webinars, and narrative text) and presentation approaches (e.g., school-based, small groups). Continue to build out blended learning opportunities so that all staff can more easily access the content.

*Exemplary Implementation Models.* Identify and share district-wide best practices that demonstrate high expectations and effective implementation to ensure they include students with IEPs, ELs, students who are twice exceptional, etc. Encourage staff to visit exemplary schools and set aside time for that to happen.

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<sup>7</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.learningforward.org/standards#.UMvVD7Yt0kU>

*Annual Survey.* Conduct an annual survey to measure teachers' instructional beliefs and practices and analyze by school and role. Develop a plan for each school site to improve its results over time. Use survey data to design and prioritize professional learning.

### Community Partnerships

"It takes a village to raise a child" is a popular proverb with a clear message: the whole community has an essential role to play in the growth and development of its young people. In addition to the vital role that parents and family members play in a child's education, the broader community also has a responsibility to assure high-quality education for all students. Parent, family, and community involvement in education correlates with higher academic performance and school improvement. When schools, parents, families, and communities work together to support learning, students tend to earn higher grades, attend school more regularly, stay in school longer, and enroll in higher level programs.

**School Climate and Culture.** Develop and implement strategies to improve school climate and culture so that all students feel welcome and engaged with teachers and other students.

**Evaluate Family Engagement Annually.** Evaluate the implementation and impact of family engagement activities specific to the Student Support Process. Review the action taken to strengthen trusting relationships and connections to student learning.

## IV. Recommendations

Recommendations were drawn from the following key findings that emerged as consistent themes across all research areas.

1. District culture limits the ability of those charged with special education, Section 504 and ATSS oversight to implement and enforce priority practices.
2. Site-based management has resulted in significant variations in service delivery between school buildings.
3. APS has a highly active and engaged parent community. However, this engagement, when coupled with site-based management, leads to increased inconsistencies among schools.
4. Rapid enrollment growth and changes in leadership make the need for documented district-wide policies and universal professional learning opportunities even more critical.
5. While the new professional learning framework is promising, it is still "choice" based. Principals and school-based staff need additional quality, ongoing baseline training to serve in their roles.

The action steps listed under each recommendation below are organized in a manner that provides a comprehensive view of the activities required to initiate change. Although components of the action steps can be implemented within a shorter timeframe, full-scale implementation of the recommendations may take three-to-five years.

By implementing these recommendations with fidelity, APS will accomplish the following goals:

1. Set an overall district-wide vision for providing high quality services to students with disabilities and those requiring intervention
2. Create a culture that promotes the successful inclusion and integration of students with disabilities and other underserved, at-risk and economically disadvantaged students
3. Enhance parent and community engagement by creating warm, respectful and welcoming environments and be flexible in accommodating the spectrum of family needs
4. Strengthen links between school and home to help culturally and linguistically diverse parents help their children learn and gain equal access to all APS educational programs and services

5. Develop measures to drive key strategies for positive changes in behavior, processes, and culture, while encouraging continuous improvement and innovation

## ATSS

**Goal:** Expand on the current ATSS framework to make it more consistently operational in every school, thereby ensuring all students receive the instruction and interventions they need to support academic and social/emotional learning, and to achieve at a higher level of performance.

### Core Strategies and Action Steps

✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Vision and Leadership	Standards and Implementation	Data, Monitoring, and Accountability	Professional Learning	Parent and Family Engagement

### Vision and Leadership

- 1 **ATSS Leadership Teams.** Establish leadership teams at the central office and school levels to support ATSS planning and overseeing implementation activities. Establish clear roles and responsibilities for teams at each level. Have each team embed in its primary planning document how they will oversee ATSS implementation through data collection and review, monitoring for consistent implementation, identifying training and technical assistance needs, indicators for school walk-throughs, and incentives/consequences when expectations are not met (absent reason).
- 2 **Universal Design for Learning.** Embed universal design for learning (UDL) principles into the ATSS framework. To participate with success in the general curriculum, a student with special needs may need additional services, such as instructional supports, accommodations, scaffolding, assistive technology, and other services. With a universal design for learning (UDL) approach, information is presented in varied ways, allowing multiple avenues of learning and expression. Provide district-wide training on how UDL operates in practice across all settings and for all students.

### Standards and Implementation

- 3 **ATSS Delivery.** Review and continue to build on the existing ATSS service delivery model to ensure:
  - 3.1 All student services are organized in a multi-tier approach addressing both academics and behavior at elementary and secondary level.
  - 3.2 Data are consistently collected and analyzed data to assess student baseline levels and to make decisions about student progress.
  - 3.3 Academic and behavioral interventions selected and implemented are evidence-based.
  - 3.4 There is guidance to support the implementation of all evidenced-based interventions.
  - 3.5 That the procedural integrity of interventions is measured and monitored.
  - 3.6 All ATSS requirements and processes, when implemented at the school- and district-level, are be scalable and sustainable over time.

- 4 **Social Emotional Learning.** Establish goals and universal expectations that schools will provide social emotional learning (SEL) as part of its ATSS work, including the use of an SEL curriculum, community wraparound services, etc. Conduct ongoing professional learning on the Social-Emotional Learning Reference Guide and continue to build out SEL resource for school-based staff, parents/families, and students.
- 5 **Secondary Schools.** Continue to develop resources specific to tiered models of intervention support for secondary schools (such as the Intervention Guidance Document for Secondary English Language Arts) and offer professional learning opportunities designed for secondary school-based staff.
- 6 **Written Guidance.** Continue to build out the Student Support Manual and update at least annually. Develop metrics to measure implementation at each school and determine what decisions school-based teams can make versus what activities APS is requiring each school to do.
- 7 **Terminology.** Provide professional learning opportunities for all staff on the Student Support Manual, specifically on the ATSS, CLT, etc. terminology and framework intersection. Ensure the APS website is updated with this information.

### Data, Monitoring, and Accountability

- 8 **Data Review.** Regularly collect, analyze, report, and follow up on student academic/behavior-related data. Disaggregate student-level data by special need areas, race/ethnicity, EL, socio-economic disadvantage, school, school grade levels, as feasible and appropriate, to inform decision-making for the following issues:
  - 8.1 Representation of students in various special needs and disability areas to identify over/underrepresentation and establish follow-up activities.
  - 8.2 Performance data to identify instructional gaps. Benchmark progress of students with an IEP against their general education peers.
  - 8.3 Determination of when students should be considered for Tier 2 or 3 interventions or referral to special education.
- 9 **Progress Monitoring.** Establish criteria for how progress on interventions will be monitored and on initiating a referral for special education services when sufficient progress is not made after providing the appropriate interventions. Determine what is an APS expectation for progress monitoring and what will be a school-based decision.
- 10 **Walk-through Protocols.** Review existing walk-through protocols to ensure that they include sufficient indicators relevant to differentiated instruction and ATSS implementation. Conduct walk-throughs at least monthly to monitor the extent to which school practices conform to the guidance provided in the Student Support Manual, and initiate technical assistance, professional development, coaching, and mentoring as necessary to improve practices.
- 11 **Electronic Record Systems.** Verify that Synergy has fields available to capture specific data needed to monitor ATSS and add additional ones as needed. Develop user-friendly reports by school, grade level, class, program, and other categories to inform decision-making at all APS levels. Establish criteria for when and how data are entered and review district-wide and school-based reports at least monthly.
- 12 **Clear Expectations for ATSS.** Develop a well-articulated and communicated tiered support structure in which schools retain the ability to make decisions specific to their school population (e.g., which reading intervention to select from a list of 2-3 pre-vetted APS selections) but within “guardrails” established by the central office (e.g., each school must use an evidence-based reading intervention). Differentiate level of support based of how individual schools are meeting defined benchmarks. If individual schools are not meeting agreed upon expectations (i.e., a school’s special education referral rate is exceeding the district average, for example, or progress on interventions

are not consistently documented), the central office would increase its level of involvement and directives to the school. Give more autonomy and flexibility to schools that are performing well on defined expectations.

**Professional Learning**

- 13 **Professional Learning.** As part of the Teaching and Learning Framework, incorporate the following topics specific to ATSS:
  - 13.1 Student Support Manual, including PLCs, CLTs, and the overall ATSS framework
  - 13.2 Data Collection and Progress Monitoring
  - 13.3 Academic Interventions
  - 13.4 Social Emotional Learning and Interventions
  - 13.5 Universal Design for Learning
  - 13.6 Culturally Relevant Teaching
  - 13.7 Other Topics as Referenced in Recommendations

**Parent and Family Engagement**

- 14 **Family-Friendly Guides.** Develop family-friendly reference guides about ATSS and intervention supports available to struggling students.
- 15 **Translated Materials.** Provide translated documents for parents/family members.

**Referral and Eligibility**

**Goal:** Ensure that the referral processes for struggling students are appropriate and comprehensive. Review data frequently to assess eligibility patterns.

Core Strategies and Action Steps

		✓	✓	
Vision and Leadership	Standards and Implementation	Data, Monitoring, and Accountability	Professional Learning	Parent and Family Engagement

**Data, Monitoring, and Accountability**

- 16 **Analyze and Address Disparate Identification Practices.** Develop a process to review recent eligibility documentation for students who qualified for IEPs and those who qualified for 504 Plans. Create useful reports that will help APS collect and analyze the necessary data in order to analyze discrepant patterns in the types of students eligible for services under Section 504 and IDEA.
  - 16.1 Disaggregate the data by sex, race, ethnicity and school.
  - 16.2 Examine the referral and eligibility data for over/under representation to determine causal factors and inform the development of strategies to address discrepancies.

- 16.3 Use a facilitator for school-based personnel to review together random files for students with similar characteristics to identify any patterns and trends, including the extent to which students had received documented progress monitored research-based general education interventions, and their achievement growth after receiving an IEP or access to accommodations after receiving a 504 Plan.
  - 16.4 Identify policies and procedures that may be standing in the way or need to be developed and implemented for the proper identification of minority students.
  - 16.5 Communicate and disseminate the necessary information to parents of minority and EL students so that they also fully understand how to seek a diagnosis that will allow their child to access additional equitable services/supports under Section 504 or IDEA.
  - 16.6 As part of the review, determine if/how refining APS eligibility criteria would be useful to better inform the eligibility determination process.
- 17 **Disproportionality.** Monitor the identification of students with IEPs in a racial/ethnic subgroup to ensure that it is not at least two times more likely than peers to be identified as having a disability area, (i.e., risk ratios). Benchmark initial referrals and eligibility determinations by race/ethnicity in the areas of concern. Twice yearly, track whether the use of ATSS is reducing racial/ethnic disparities in initial referrals and eligibility determinations in these areas. For students who appear to be underrepresented in a disability, provide teachers with information regarding their characteristics to support the appropriate referral of students with these characteristics for an evaluation of their eligibility and any need for special education services.
- 18 **Track Data.** Monitor the results of APS activities to determine if they are having any impact on the identification of students in areas of concern, and to take follow-up action as appropriate. Use district-wide and school-based instructional leadership teams for this purpose.

### Professional Learning

- 19 **Professional Learning.** As part of the Teaching and Learning Framework, incorporate the following topics specific to Referral and Eligibility:
- 19.1 Root Cause Analysis
  - 19.2 Culturally Relevant Teaching and Assessment Practices
  - 19.3 Referral and Eligibility Process for ELs
  - 19.4 Referral and Eligibility Process for Gifted Learners
  - 19.5 Eligibility Requirements under IDEA and Section 504
  - 19.6 Other Topics as Referenced in Recommendations

### Special Education

**Goals:** Actualize APS's vision as a diverse and inclusive school community, committed to academic excellence and integrity, by maximizing inclusive and effective instruction, intervention and support for all students, including those with special and dual needs. These students include those who are ELLs and/or receive support through ATSS, a Section 504 plan, and/or an IEP.

Lay a foundation for this work by expanding APS’s courageous conversations involving race and ethnicity to include students with disabilities.

Have conversations with stakeholders and school board members about APS’s current configuration of services for students with disabilities, their performance over time, and the District’s fortitude to embark on a journey to provide services in a more inclusive manner.

Begin the process of providing special education services in more inclusive educational settings to students with disabilities to ensure more equitable access to school choice and high-quality instruction.

### Core Strategies and Action Steps

✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Vision and Leadership	Standards and Implementation	Data, Monitoring, and Accountability	Professional Learning	Parent and Family Engagement

### Vision and Leadership

- 20 **Academic Optimism and Growth Mindset.** Set high expectations in the provision of rigorous instruction, supports and related services delineated in IEPs so that students have the necessary tools they need to access high quality instruction. Guide the design of intentional structures and utilization of resources that will help foster greater collaboration across disciplines, grade levels, and areas of specific expertise. Develop and implement protocols for fidelity checks on IEP delivered versus prescribed services (e.g., co-teaching, instructional and testing accommodations/modifications, specially designed instruction, related services, etc.).
- 21 **Inclusive Practices Planning, Guidance, and Implementation.** Select and use a structured framework that will help promote and support the implementation of best practices for inclusive education including the provision of high yield co-teaching and specially designed instruction. Develop a clearly articulated district/school implementation guide for inclusive practices and determine what role schools will have in adapting it to their needs versus what will be required by APS. Create guidance around developing inclusive master school schedules (which includes common co-teacher planning time) and assist schools with implementing it. Develop supportive structures that allow effective co-teaching teams to create efficiency and partnership build investment.

### Standards and Implementation

- 22 **Early Childhood.** Expand the continuum of services for students and co-taught models with the VPI and Montessori models. Intentionally develop clusters of EC programs at specific sites so that a more robust continuum can be offered. Continue to build curricular alignment and resource availability between all early childhood programs and those specifically serving students with disabilities. Develop an early intervening (ATSS) model for EC so that students are not over-referred for a special education evaluation.
- 23 **Equity and Access to Advanced Placement for Students with Disabilities.** Develop a coherent plan across grade levels and schools to enable a higher proportion of potentially qualified students with disabilities to benefit from advanced academic studies/courses. Provide guidance to IEP teams, school-based staff, and parents about how students with disabilities can access advanced placement

courses, with the appropriate supports and accommodations. Analyze current barriers to access for students with disabilities and develop a plan to mitigate these challenges. Establish a goal to increase current enrollment of students with disabilities in advanced placement courses and monitor enrollment data on a quarterly basis.

- 24 **Twice Exceptional.** Provide schools with the guidance, training, and support necessary to better understand how to implement viable programming and strategies for twice exceptional students to:
  - nurture the student’s potential;
  - support development of compensatory strategies;
  - identify learning gaps and provide explicit instruction;
  - foster social and emotional development; and
  - enhance their capacity to address their mixed ability needs.
- 25 **English Learner (EL) Students with Disabilities.** Build staff capacity to meet the needs of EL students with disabilities by using data to identify eligible students, address their needs, deliver instruction, use evidenced-based strategies, differentiate support and interventions, monitor progress and communicate/collaborate on the provision of the necessary supports. Pursuant to the Department of Justice settlement agreement, fulfill all requirements specific to students with disabilities.
- 26 **Special Education Policies, Procedures and Guidance.** Expand the special education resources available to users/stakeholders to support IEP development, implementation, and compliance as follows:
  - Create IEP Writing and Best Practices Guide reflecting IEP development process
  - Create translated versions of the Parent Resource Information Guide and make it available in the primary home languages of the community at large
  - Develop and implement IEP stakeholder engagement plan using the survey result information to improve practices
  - Implement the facilitated IEP process for potentially complex meetings to enhance collaboration, communication and the successful drafting of the student’s IEP.
  - Create IEP development, implementation and compliance auditing protocol and checklist
  - Set IEP self-auditing expectations for schools, require submission and/or onsite review of sample records and monitor results to inform strategies
- 27 **Restraint and Seclusion.** Finalize and approve APS’s guidance on restraint and seclusion, ensuring it meets the requirements of VDOE’s guiding regulations. Develop a centralized data collection system, train appropriate staff on how to collect and track data, and monitor trends monthly. Provide additional district-wide training on appropriate and safe de-escalation practices, ensuring they are aligned to each school’s positive behavior framework.
- 28 **Transition Meetings.** Develop district-wide strategy to transition meetings for students with IEPs so that teachers understand incoming students’ needs. Focus specifically on grade level transitions.
- 29 **IEP Access.** Include mechanisms to ensure that general education and special education teachers have read and acknowledged student plans and have specific plans to address them in their classroom. Develop procedures to ensure access is providing in a timely manner to appropriate staff when students change classes, grades, or schools.

### Data, Monitoring, and Accountability

- 30 **Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) Data.** Establish a standing district committee to review LRE data and trends by school in order to inform the development of district/school specific strategies that will help address meeting the SPP LRE Targets set forth by the state.
- 31 **Progress Monitoring with Data Collection.** Develop easily accessible reports by school and case carrier that enable APS to monitor the progress of students toward meeting their IEP goals. Analyze

the data on a routine basis to determine what coaching/professional learning opportunities could be offered to special educators, general educators, and paraeducators in support of their students' IEP goals.

- 32 **State Performance Plan (SPP) Indicators.** Develop formative reports to assess progress toward meeting SPP indicators, review with relevant stakeholders, and set internal goals for how to meet and/or exceed Virginia targets for each one.
- 33 **Standards of Learning (SOL) Performance.** As part of the 90-day progressive plan review, set goals at each school for subgroup populations and develop a specific plan to encourage the academic growth of students with disabilities.
- 34 **Clear Expectations for Special Education.** Establish clear expectations around the role of the Office of Special Education by developing a well-articulated and communicated tiered support structure in which schools retain the ability to make decisions specific to their school population but within “guardrails” established by the central office. Differentiate level of support based of how individual schools are meeting defined benchmarks. If individual schools are not meeting agreed upon expectations (i.e., a school’s attendance rate for students with disabilities is exceeding the district average, for example), OSE would increase its level of involvement and directives to the school. Give more autonomy and flexibility to schools that are performing well on defined expectations.

### Professional Learning

- 35 **Professional Learning.** As part of the Teaching and Learning Framework, incorporate the following topics specific to Special Education:
  - 35.1 Inclusive Practices and High Yield Co-Teaching Strategies
  - 35.2 IEP Implementation for General Educators
  - 35.3 Transition and Post-Secondary Goal Planning
  - 35.4 Measuring Goal Progress
  - 35.5 Other Topics as Referenced in Recommendations

### Parent and Family Engagement

- 36 **Program Descriptions.** Review and update materials posted on the APS website regarding special education programs and available supplementary aids and services at least twice a year. Ensure this information is clearly accessible and available to parents in their preferred language.
- 37 **Post-Secondary Transition.** Provide additional training and resources for parents regarding the transition process, specifically around the development of post-secondary goals and diploma options.
- 38 **Student Engagement.** Develop and implement strategies to ensure that students are active participants in the planning and implementation of their IEPs, including support and coaching for their role as self-advocate.

## Section 504

**Goal:** Improve processes and protocols to address disparities in Section 504 identification practices and ensure equitable access to supports.

## Core Strategies and Action Steps

	✓	✓	✓	✓
Vision and Leadership	Standards and Implementation	Data, Monitoring, and Accountability	Professional Learning	Parent and Family Engagement

## Standards and Implementation

- 39 **504 Plan Effectiveness.** Establish protocols for how and when feedback on the effectiveness of accommodations will be monitored and shared with parents (e.g., more frequently for students with new 504 plans or changes to accommodations). Have 504 Teams collect data by student on the efficacy of accommodations provided to share, at minimum, at the annual review.
- 40 **Plan Access.** Determine which staff should have access to 504 Plans in each school. Verify that they all have the appropriate online access to view the plans and communicate that all staff are expected to view plans for their students at least annually. Include mechanisms to ensure that teachers have read and acknowledged student plans and have specific plans to address them in their classroom. Develop procedures to ensure access is providing in a timely manner to appropriate staff when students change classes, grades, or schools.
- 41 **Health Plans.** Clarify to staff through written guidance and during training and technical support, the differences between health plans and Section 504 plans, and the importance of Section 504 procedural requirements and safeguards for students with disabilities who have medical conditions and are in need of educational or related aids and services.

## Data, Monitoring, and Accountability

- 42 **504 Plan Service Delivery Checks.** Conduct routine checks on the implementation of 504 accommodations by randomly selecting student files at various schools and conducting onsite reviews.

## Professional Learning

- 43 **Professional Learning.** As part of the Teaching and Learning Framework, incorporate the following training topics specific to Section 504:
- 43.1 Health Plans versus 504 plans
  - 43.2 504 Accommodations
  - 43.3 Synergy Data and Reports
  - 43.4 Other Topics as Referenced in Recommendations

## Parent and Family Engagement

- 44 **Parent Guidance.** Provide guidance to parents around what to expect with the 504 process and communication they will receive specific to 504 Plan implementation.
- 45 **Student Engagement.** Develop and implement strategies to ensure that students are active participants in the planning and implementation of their 504 Plans, including support and coaching for their role as self-advocate.

## District Organization and Operations

**Goal:** Establish clear expectations and align staffing and technology resources to support APS’s inclusive vision

### Core Strategies and Action Steps

✓	✓	✓	✓	
Vision and Leadership	Standards and Implementation	Data, Monitoring, and Accountability	Professional Learning	Parent and Family Engagement

### Vision and Leadership

- 46 **OSE Vision.** Develop a guiding philosophy on inclusion and a long-range strategic plan for OSE. Create an expectation regarding instruction that clearly communicates to schools, and the broader community, that a key focus of OSE is to ensure that students with special needs make significant progress, to the greatest extent possible, in the general education curriculum, receive rigorous standards-aligned instruction, and experience the high quality delivery of interventions, differentiation, accommodations, modifications and specially designed instruction in every class.
- 47 **OSE Organizational Structure.** Reorganize the OSE office by function, reducing the number of direct reports to the director and adding instruction coach positions specifically focused on supporting special educators with specially designed instruction.
- 48 **Cross-Departmental Collaboration.** Establish a schedule for routine, collaborative meetings between OSE and the leadership of other departments under the Department of Teaching and Learning, including the individuals necessary to share information, problem-solve, and resolve issues. Establish a consistent, collaborative, and integrative approach towards improvement by jointly setting goals for initiatives and creating cross-functional workgroups. Set goals for all cross-departmental initiatives and determine key performance indicators (KPIs) to measure progress made on them.

### Standards and Implementation

- 49 **90 Day Progressive Plan Goals.** Verify that all school plans have goals specific to all subgroup populations or action items to ensure high expectations for all students, coupled with appropriate supports, are included.
- 50 **Conduct an In-Depth Analysis of Staffing Allocations.** Conduct a staffing levels audit to ensure current staffing ratios are appropriate to achieve the inclusion goals set forth in the Strategy Plan and to meet the SPP LRE targets. Create a workgroup with representatives from school and central office leadership (including Special Education and Finance) to evaluate the current Planning Factors funding model and assess the extent to which current staffing supports the intended outcomes of effective service delivery and the continued enhancement of co-teaching. Review personnel ratios and caseload data included in this study, reallocate or add resources to ensure that APS expectations regarding the provision of specially designed instruction and related services are reasonably capable of being met. Make the revised formula transparent and evaluate needed changes for the short and long term. Review on an annual basis.

## Data, Monitoring, and Accountability

- 51 **Student Support Coordinators (SSC).** Conduct an analysis on the effectiveness of the SSC role after the first year of implementation. Adjust the role as needed in order to continue to provide appropriate and high-quality support to schools.
- 52 **Planning Factors.** After determining APS' approach to inclusive practices and conducting an in-depth staffing review, adjust the planning factors to ensure allocations meet required staffing and best support students with special needs in a variety of settings.
- 53 **Technology Support.** Establish expectations about the use of Synergy to document interventions and 504 Plans and complete fidelity checks (i.e., data reports) around usage to ensure consistent usage. Ensure appropriate staff have easy access to electronic plans, including IAT plans, IEPs, and 504 Plans.

## Professional Learning

- 54 **Professional Learning.** As part of the Teaching and Learning Framework, incorporate the following training topics specific to District Organization and Operations:
  - 54.1 Resource Allocation and Scheduling to Support Inclusive Practices
  - 54.2 Synergy Data and Reports
  - 54.3 Other Topics as Referenced in Recommendations



**Solutions that Matter**