

Arlington Special Education Advisory Committee
Recommendation(s) to the APS School Board
February 27th, 2024

Recommendation #1. Increase hourly staffing during unstructured time

Need: ASEAC has received numerous reports, including through public comments, of the bullying of students with disabilities during less structured times of the school day such as recess, lunch, transitions between classrooms, and PE (especially when classes are combined, resulting in high student to teacher ratios). These environments can also be less accessible to students with disabilities who require support to access larger and more chaotic social environments. It is also in these environments that, with appropriate support, students can learn social skills.

The negative consequences of hostile social interactions and barriers to inclusion during these times can spill over into other areas of the school day, further undermining the full inclusion of students with disabilities and the creation of a positive school climate for all students. Increased staffing to support positive social emotional learning and student interactions during these less/unstructured times is one means of beginning to address these issues and deepen inclusion in all aspects of school life. We have also heard from some parents that additional well-trained staff have been able to more broadly support all students during unstructured times and particularly note feedback that it has improved social interactions among all students playing together at recess, for example.

Staffing support during unstructured times needs to be driven by the development of the IEP, which should call out how to support students during unstructured time with special education staff. Addressing the problem of unstructured time will in part come about as a result of training on creating strong IEPs, but there is also a concern that support for unstructured time is not being included or suggested because people know that there are budget constraints restricting the number of special education staff.

Solution:

ASEAC recommends that APS increase staffing levels to provide adequate student support during unstructured times of the school day, especially lunch and recess. ASEAC has previously recommended that planning factors be adjusted to provide more special education staff and promote greater inclusion of students with disabilities. We are aware that this work is ongoing. In the interim, ASEAC recommends that APS increase hourly staff to fill in gaps occurring during unstructured time.

Staffing for unstructured time should be addressed in the following way:

1. The first step to increase staffing levels should be setting a mandatory student to staff ratio for lunch and recess across all schools. As far as we know, there is not currently a policy in place on this student to staff ratio.
2. Second, the district should provide guidance to schools on how to achieve this new mandated ratio with well-trained staff. The district should make recommendations on the type of staff to be

utilized and ways to train staff. Hourly extended day staff are one possible group as we understand that extended day staff sometimes face recruiting shortages because of too few hours. Staff utilized would need to be trained, particularly on how to help students resolve conflict without escalating situations and while growing students' own social skills.

3. The district should track how staff are being increased and the results. APS should track how many incidents that involve students, including students with disabilities, are occurring during unstructured time, at each school if possible, before and after implementation of increased staffing to see if new approaches are successful.
4. If there are staff constraints or budget constraints, this recommendation should be focused on schools where the highest number of incidents involving students with disabilities are occurring during these unstructured times. Different approaches could be tried at these schools, including (1) using hourly extended day staff (2) adjusting planning and lunch time to free up special education staff time (3) training existing staff better on conflict resolution.

Budgetary Implications and/or Implementation Needs:

It is hard to know budgetary impacts without knowing the student to staff ratio that will be set and what that ratio currently is. Staffing costs could be easily estimated by looking at those differences. There would also be one-time training costs for staff that do not have special education training.

Strategic Plan Alignment:

Core Values: Inclusivity, Equity

Goal: Student Well-Being

Strategies:

- Establish and promote a culture of physical, social, emotional, and mental health wellness. (S-SWB-2)
- Establish systematic, proactive, and positive strategies, interventions, and Restorative Justice practices that support student learning and well-being in all areas involving student conduct. (S-SWB-5)

Committee vote: This recommendation was supported unanimously by the committee members present with a vote of 8 to zero but there was not a quorum for this meeting.

Staff response:

The Office of Special Education supports this recommendation. Our office often gets requests to provide hourly special education funding for additional student support during lunch, recess, and specials (i.e. art, music, PE). These are times where the teachers need to have their planning time or lunch and if the school does not already have some additional staff that can help monitor students, help to implement behavior plans, and help facilitate positive social interactions.

Recommendation #2. Open up classes currently available only to students with an IEP to those with a 504 and in the long term consider how these courses can be open to all students.

Need: In the program of studies for middle school on p15, there is an “Instructional Studies” course (10028) offered to help with each student’s IEP and also to provide listening skills, writing skills, organizational, and general study skills. This course requires a student to have an IEP. At the same time, there is a “Student Support” class (11129) offered for students in general education. This course is about planning and study habits as well as goal setting. These courses seem to cover similar topics. Having these as separate courses—one for students with an IEP and one for students without an IEP—is not aligned with the desire to foster an inclusive learning environment. All students could benefit from study skills.

Similarly, there is a “Social Skills” course (10023) that is only open for students with an IEP. This course goes over how to communicate better, work in groups, and cope with stress and frustration. Again, these are strategies that many students need to learn. Opening up this course could allow for a more inclusive environment to learn these social skills including learning social skills for communication between students with and without disabilities. It is worth noting that in the high school program of studies the “Social Skills” course (20023) does appear to be open to all students. It’s not clear why this inclusive approach would be encouraged at the high school level but not the middle school level.

Solution:

ASEAC recommends that APS take a two-stage approach to addressing these disparities.

1. In the short-term open the two courses that currently require students be approved for special education students to those with a 504 but not an IEP.
2. Over the longer term, plan how these a course on social skills and on study skills could be offered to students in an inclusive environment.

Budgetary Implications and/or Implementation Needs: We don’t expect huge demand from the non special education community for these classes but if there is high demand, then there may be budget constraints to offering more sessions of the class. If demand were above capacity we would want to ensure slots are prioritized based on need.

Strategic Plan Alignment:

Core Values: Inclusivity

Goal: Student Well-Being

Strategies: Increase co-taught sections of courses and classes to support the inclusion of students (S-SWB-6)

Committee vote: This recommendation was supported unanimously by the committee members present with a vote of 8 to zero but there was not a quorum for this meeting.

Staff response:

The Office of Special Education supports this recommendation and has already proposed updated language in the Program of Studies for next school year to make Instructional Studies available to students with 504 plans at both the middle and high school levels.

Additionally, the Office of Special Education supports the recommendation of offering Social Skills courses at the middle and high school levels to students with 504 plans as well as students with IEPs.

Recommendation #3: Explicitly indicate that students with disabilities are eligible for “rigorous courses” including new “intensified” courses at the middle school level.

Need: Both the High School and Middle School Program of Studies addresses “Preparation for Rigorous Studies” (page 5 and page 7, respectively of the High School and Middle School documents). While the current text indicates that APS encourages “all students to enroll and succeed in advanced courses” schools are not hearing the message that “all” includes students with disabilities. ASEAC has historically advocated for greater access to rigorous courses for students with disabilities and yet students who need services or accommodations continue to struggle to gain access to these courses. This includes being discouraged from enrolling, or being denied their services and/or accommodations when they do seek to enroll.

Solution:

ASEAC recommends that additional text explicitly indicate that students with IEPs and/or 504s are encouraged to enroll in intensified, AP, and IB classes and will have equitable access, including appropriate services and accommodations as specified in their IEPs or 504 plans when they enroll in these classes. [Likewise, while we do not have jurisdiction over issues impacting English Learners, we also encourage the explicit inclusion of this student subgroup with regard to access to rigorous courses.]

We recognize that this language alone will not overcome the challenges parents and students face in obtaining appropriate services and accommodations for these courses. However, it is important that the Program of Studies sets a clear expectation that students with disabilities have access to these classes, and will receive the support and accommodations they are entitled to in these classes.

Also, APS has recently added new “intensified” courses at the middle school level. To echo a point made last spring by APS’s Diversity, Equity & Inclusion staff, the best time to address inclusion in the curriculum is in the development of that curriculum. While some of those classes have already been developed (and others are forthcoming), we urge APS to explicitly indicate that students with disabilities have access, including necessary accommodations and services, to all rigorous courses.

Budgetary Implications and/or Implementation Needs: There may be a budgetary impact if students with disabilities are not enrolling in classes in which they could. Technically, the program of studies currently indicates these classes are open to “all” students. Students with disabilities who access those classes should already have access to supports and accommodations necessary to access these courses. Practically speaking, that is not always the case. If the change to make it clear that students with disabilities are eligible results in many more students being enrolled in these courses, there may be added expenses for supports needed.

Strategic Plan Alignment:

Core Values: Inclusivity, Equity

Goals: Student Well-Being, Student Success

Strategies:

- Increase co-taught sections of courses and classes to support the inclusion of students (S-SWB-6)
- Deliver curriculum through innovative and relevant instruction that is differentiated to meet the diverse needs of each student. (S-SS-2)

Committee vote: This recommendation was supported unanimously by the committee members present with a vote of 8 to zero but there was not a quorum for this meeting.

Staff response:

The office of Special Education supports this recommendation and will propose language to be added in the next round of revisions for the Program of Studies to explicitly state that all courses are inclusive of students with disabilities and students and families are encouraged to discuss all advanced course options with their counselor. Additionally, the Office of Special Education supports this inclusive messaging as we need to help all staff, including our general education teachers, to have the training and tools to feel equipped to teach all students in all of their courses regardless of disability status especially since additional special education staff cannot be in every class all day. Students with disabilities are first and foremost, general education students and should be meaningfully supported in any class they enroll in.