

MEMORANDUM

TO: Arlington School Board

FROM: Arlington Special Education Advisory Committee

DATE: June 20, 2025

SUBJECT: Summary Recommendations from ASEAC

The purpose of this memorandum is to summarize important recommendations made over the past two years to the school board with a focus on those recommendations that have not yet been implemented. Additionally, we raise some new items under “Recruiting and Retention,” which is otherwise an ongoing area of concern. ASEAC’s recommendations are as follows:

Inclusion

Recommendation 1: APS should develop a plan to phase in these planning factor reforms over time, including a focus on extending to schools participating in the MCIE and/or expanding next to secondary schools consistent with our prior recommendation.

One of ASEAC’s highest priorities is helping APS successfully achieve its inclusion goals—that 80 percent of students with disabilities should be in the general education setting 80 percent of the time. (see [June 2023 recommendations](#) for additional background).

Important progress has been made this year on two fronts: model sites for inclusion and planning factor reform. We commend APS for its work in these areas, while also recognizing the need for longer term plans.

We remind the school board that the planning factor reforms are fundamentally about shifting APS’ planning factors from a model that favors segregation to a model that favors inclusion. The planning factor work goes hand in hand with the multi-year inclusion project with the Maryland Coalition for Inclusive Education.

Yet of the schools selected for planning factor reform, only Randolph Elementary is also among the four schools collaborating with MCIE. Moreover, none of the schools selected for planning factor reform are at the secondary level, where inclusion rates are lower than in our elementary schools. Moving forward, we recommend that APS

develop a plan to phase in planning factor reforms that addresses the original intent of this work to move towards resource allocation that favors inclusion over segregation.

Planning Factor Reform	Abindgon Elementary, Barcroft Elementary, Barrett Elementary, Carlin Springs Elementary, Charles R. Drew Elementary, Innovation Elementary, Oakridge Elementary, Randolph Elementary
Model Sites for MCIE Collaboration	Fleet Elementary, Randolph Elementary, Gunston Middle School, Washington Liberty High School

Recommendation 2: All schools participating in MCIE collaboration or planning factor reform should have an inclusion goal in their school action plan.

ASEAC appreciates that inclusion is included as a performance objective in APS' [2024-2030 Strategic Plan](#). However, very few schools have an inclusion goal in their annual [School Action Plans](#) to continually monitor and address inclusion. School Action Plans are the tool by which APS encourages and monitors progress on its Strategic Plan objectives.

APS' baseline data indicates that fewer than 65% of APS students with disabilities currently spend 80% or more of their school day in a general education setting - this is far short of the 80% goal by 2030. Yet most schools do not have an inclusion goal in their school action plan.

Of the four schools participating in the MCIE collaboration, Randolph does not have an inclusion goal in its School Action Plan. Of the eight schools participating in planning factor reforms, seven do not have an inclusion goal. Only Innovation Elementary has an inclusion goal. We understand that schools were selected for planning factor reform based on achievement of students with disabilities rather than inclusion rates, but we note that inclusion rates at the eight schools range from 59% to 84%. We can see this trend across APS schools - many are far short of the strategic plan goal but their school action plan does not have inclusion as a goal.

Ideally, all APS schools would have an inclusion goal if they are expected to make progress towards the Strategic Plan Performance Objective, but at a minimum, those schools participating in specific interventions related to inclusion should have inclusion as a goal in their school action plans.

We understand that schools right now are limited to addressing no more than five goals in their action plans. With the required focus on English and Math and other VDOE

requirements, the board should consider increasing this limit. The school board chose the metrics in the APS Strategic Plan because they matter, and schools should be accountable to the community for meeting these goals even if that means there are more than 5 goals to address.

Discipline

Recommendation 3: Establish stricter monitoring of schools on suspension disparities with more schools required to address strategies to address suspension disparities in their school action plans.

As noted in [ASEAC's recommendations last year](#), the disproportionality of suspensions is higher for students with disabilities than any other group and there are significant overlaps between disproportionality by disability status and race (of students with disabilities suspended, 82 percent are also students of color). Yet it does not seem that schools are being asked to take steps to reduce these disproportionalities.

- Not a single elementary school was required to address suspension disparities in their 2024-2024 action plans even though suspension disparities for students with disabilities are highest for elementary schools with a risk ratio of 3.9 in 2023-2024, meaning elementary students with disabilities are almost 4 times more likely to be suspended as their peers. Suspensions for elementary students are lower in absolute terms than for middle or high school students but as the disparities are more pronounced, elementary school leadership should be required to address these disparities. This will help to prevent issues in middle school and high school.
- No middle schools were required to address suspension disparities.
- Only one high school was required to address suspension disparities.

The strategic plan goal is to reduce disparities to within 5 percentage points. Given that aggressive goal, ASEAC recommends that any school with a disparity above 2.0 be required to address disparities in their school action plans. As noted in our recommendations last year:

“These action plans should address how IEPs are developed because disparities increase when behavior related to disabilities is not being appropriately addressed through an IEP. Per the note above about disaggregating data and looking at intersections, a school’s action plan should address other suspension disparities so that schools have to address their disparities for race/ethnicity/ELL status and disability at the same time since these are correlated.”

One of the strategies that we recommended be used to address discipline disparities is providing more staffing during unstructured times (ie. lunch, recess, gym) that could help to resolve conflicts proactively and deescalate tense situations. ASEAC discussed [this recommendation](#) more in depth in fall of 2024. Additional staffing during unstructured times would also address bullying as more than half of bullying incidents occur outside of the classroom.

Recommendation 4: Create and communicate a Discipline Appeal process for In-School suspensions.

This issue is important because some students with disabilities who are victimized by bullying have been disciplined for their response. If a student receives In-School Suspension (ISS) as a result of their reaction to being bullied, the formal discipline letter sent to parents states, "In-School Suspensions may not be appealed." ISS punishes the SWD, and does not provide the support that is needed to teach a more appropriate response.

Bullying

Recommendation 5: Finish upgrading Bullying & Harassment Reporting technologies to improve data integrity and accuracy.

The Office of Student Support communicated in April 2025 they are working on two initiatives critical to collecting accurate bullying data. APS is projected to implement a new reporting form technology by the Fall 2025. APS is also exploring an online bullying and harassment management system to centralize incident tracking and streamline communications. Completion of these two initiatives is essential to continue making anti-bullying progress.

Recommendation 6: Review the SEL curriculum at all levels to ensure it is accessible, addresses bullying, harassment, and bias against people with disabilities, and helps all children develop positive relationships and empathy for peers with disabilities.

There remains a need to update Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum. There is a plan to provide an adapted curriculum for students with disabilities but given the disproportionate number of students with disabilities that are being bullied, bullying prevention curriculum needs to go farther in addressing the acceptance of students with disabilities and other marginalized communities, and not enough input from the disability community has been included. It is also important to assess the implementation of the

SEL curriculum at all levels to ensure components related to disability are effectively implemented.

Recommendation 7: Implement an Audit process for reviews of cases for accountability and improvement.

APS reported in the SEPTA Anti-Bullying workshop that in January 2025, APS received 54 bullying complaints, but after investigation it determined only 10 were actually bullying. ASEAC notes that state reporting requirements are a disincentive for schools to categorize incidents as bullying or harassment.

APS Central Office should review schools’ bullying investigations to ensure they are handled correctly and consistently. In addition, APS Central office should conduct timely post-bullying interviews with people who have recently gone through the process at a school to get their feedback on what worked and what could be improved, and cross check that school(s) are following procedures correctly. If school(s) are not, APS Central office can do more training with those schools.

Recruiting and Retention

Recommendation 8: The School Board should request a mid-summer update on special education recruitment. Further, APS should ensure it is offering incentives commensurate with surrounding districts and advertising those incentives.

Last fall, ASEAC [recommended](#) various actions on recruitment and retention. As we close out the school year, we note sharp increases in year over year Special Education vacancies, continuing a multi-year trend. Compared to this time last year, there are approximately 50 special education teacher vacancies. There are additional vacancies for assistants, coordinators and speech language pathologists, and other roles.

While APS is increasing special education teachers at eight schools related to planning factor reforms, roughly half the openings are for secondary schools which are not increasing their staffing levels. Secondary special education roles are often hard to fill as are those MIPA/Life Skills roles that work with some of our most vulnerable populations.

Year	SpEd Teacher Vacancies	Percent change over prior year
May 2023	35 (approximated)	–
May 2024	45	29% increase
May 2025	50	11% increase

We are encouraged that APS will conduct focus groups with staff to understand monetary and non-monetary conditions impacting retention and is also looking at the impact of differentiated pay scales in neighboring districts. As APS undertakes those efforts, we also strongly recommend a mid-summer School Board update on special education recruitment.

Recommendation 9: Shorten hiring process for substitutes.

At our May meeting, members learned of months-long delay to become a substitute. An individual indicated they had applied to be a substitute in February of this year, did not receive a response for several weeks, and as of May – had been waiting five weeks for a county background check. This example indicates there are still significant delays at several steps in the process that APS needs to address.

ASEAC continues to see how recruitment issues hurts APS' ability to hire in a timely manner undermines operational efficiency. Many substitutes would simply go to another district or give up together.

Recommendation 10: Ensure substitutes in certain classrooms have adequate training

Based on recent committee discussion, it is unclear that substitutes assigned to some of our hardest to fill classrooms - MIPA and Life Skills - receive adequate training, particularly in crisis prevention - to work with these vulnerable students. Questions were raised about whether or not substitutes in our MIPA and Life Skills classes receive adequate training for those assignments. We appreciate that APS should not erect additional barriers to substitute staffing, but could instead consider extending training to substitutes interested in those assignments. Note that under federal law, parents of all students at Title I schools are entitled to know whether or not assigned staff meet certification and licensure requirements.

Transparency & Communication

Recommendation 11: Share bullying data along with other key APS statistics.

Once APS has implemented improved bullying data collection tools (projected Fall 2025), key bullying metrics should be shared regularly with the community on the dashboard.

Recommendation 12: Adopt a policy establishing a “Right to Know” policy that provides for notification to parents of students with disabilities when there is an extended absence of a special education staff impacting the student.

In February of this year, we submitted this recommendation as a complement to our recommendations around recruitment and retention. ASEAC has also addressed the need for notification in [earlier recommendations](#). Transparency around long-term staff vacancies/absences and staff qualifications is important for families and schools to help

students with disabilities be successful. The Every Student Succeeds Act already provides protections to students enrolled in Title I schools—requiring notification if their child is assigned a teacher for four or more consecutive weeks who does not meet applicable state certifications or licensure requirements.

Our recommendation is simply that APS establish a clear policy, modeled after these protections in ESSA that make clear to both parents and staff that parents of students with disabilities should be notified of extended absences and have a right to know about the qualifications of the special education staff working with their students. We suggest this policy be added to [Policy I-7.2.1 Special Education Programs and Services](#) with conforming changes to the associated Policy Implementation Procedure ([I-7.2 PIP-1 Special Education Programs and Services](#)). We note the PIP already includes a section on Rights of Parents/Guardians, which could be updated as described above.

In conclusion, we want to thank the School Board for their attention to our committee's work. We have appreciated Ms. Tapia-Hadley's active role as our liaison and Ms. Kadera's communication with Advisory Committee Chairs throughout the year. We understand that the School Board will be modifying the policy for most Advisory Committees to ensure that School Board is informed by the parent expertise in these volunteer groups. Parents of students with disabilities often develop, out of necessity, deep expertise to advocate for our students and our members have brought that same expertise to this Advisory Committee. We look forward to increased opportunities to engage and inform your work on the School Board.