

## Advisory Committee for Students with Disabilities November 13, 2024

| Committee Members in Attendance   | Committee Members Absent   | Staff and Guests in Attendance  |
|---|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Holly Stearns, <i>Vice Chair</i></li> <li>• Mimi Abdulkadir</li> <li>• Ally Baldassari</li> <li>• Jay Berkenbilt</li> <li>• Kristine Bennett*</li> <li>• Ahsen Cakez</li> <li>• Amanda Campbell</li> <li>• Rachel Charlton</li> <li>• Anita Chinyavong</li> <li>• Mary Kay Ciziunas</li> <li>• Daniel Cronnell</li> <li>• Shannon Duncan</li> <li>• Susan Edgerton</li> <li>• Carolyn Haydon</li> <li>• Colleen Jones</li> <li>• Hope Luong</li> <li>• Lauren McCaughey</li> <li>• Nita Payton</li> <li>• Brandis Ruise</li> <li>• Sonan Sahgal</li> <li>• Rajiv Satsangi</li> <li>• Stephanie Smith</li> <li>• Adriana Van Breda</li> <li>• Joanne Walton</li> <li>• Amanda Wittman</li> <li>• Daniel Yeum</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Elizabeth Zielinski, <i>Chair</i></li> <li>• David Bean</li> <li>• Delaney Brooks</li> <li>• Brandon Cassady</li> <li>• Harry Henderson</li> <li>• Elizabeth Shapiro</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shannon Anderson<br/><i>Director, Family Resource Center*</i></li> <li>• Mike Bloom<br/><i>Director, Office of Special Education Instruction</i></li> <li>• Terri Edmunds-Heard<br/><i>Assistant Superintendent, Dept. of Special Services</i></li> <li>• Kathy Murphy<br/><i>Assistant Ombuds for Special Education</i></li> <li>• Dawn Schaefer<br/><i>Director, Office of Special Education Procedural Support</i></li> </ul> |

\* Participated virtually.

### Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 8:10 pm. A quorum of committee members was present in the room; one member participated virtually.

## **Minutes**

The committee unanimously approved the agenda, but deferred approval of the minutes of the previous meeting until Jay Berkenbilt's concerns could be resolved.

The Vice Chair noted that she would preside over the meeting in the chair's absence. She asked members to please speak up if she inadvertently failed to follow any committee rules.

## **Public Comment**

One public comment was made by Ms. Callie Oettinger. She shared that after she filed a complaint in 2020, the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) found FCPS to be in noncompliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) for providing independent educational evaluations (IEEs) at public expense. She said that Dawn Schaefer responded in a way that would avoid fixing the problem. As a result, FCPS must provide Prior Written Notice (PWN) after a meeting, whether or not Individualized Education Plan (IEP) consent has been reached. Ms. Oettinger noted a situation regarding a particular school in which she feels certain central office staff acted as barriers to following VDOE decisions and what is right for students with disabilities.

## **School Board Liaison Report**

Rachna Sizemore-Heizer, the School Board's representative to the ACSD, reported the following:

1. The budget process for Fiscal Year 2026 has begun. FCPS is anticipating a \$275 million shortfall, in part because of an increase in the number of special education students but a decrease in state funding of 16% and a decrease in IDEA funding. Ms. Sizemore-Heizer chairs the budget committee. She noted that the school board will pass a desired budget in February but that they will pass another in May that harmonizes with the amount of money received from county, state, and federal funding.
2. The School Board is assessing recent changes to grading that were intended to make it more consistent but that have had the unintended impact of increasing student anxiety. She has heard from families of students with test-taking anxiety that the practice of unlimited retakes up to 100% of the grade encourages students to continually study for and retake tests while trying to learn new material and study for new tests. This is a burden for both teachers and students. The School Board is considering a policy to limit tests to one retake; requesting a more balanced split between summative and formative grades (which are currently split with 70% for summative assessments (tests, projects) and 30% for formative ones (homework, in-class work); and allowing teachers to give a zero unless a student shows "reasonable effort." The division will have the final say. All School Board draft policies are available on Board Docs.
3. Ms. Sizemore-Heizer addressed the concern of a number of ACSD members that the committee's report must follow the structure of FCPS's Strategic Plan. She said that Superintendent Reid's main focus is the Strategic Plan, which will be in place for seven

years. She feels strongly that all work should be aligned with the plan to be able to achieve its goals; as a result, the School Board is aligning its work to it. The ACSD doing the same will make its advocacy more clear and effective.

4. New state accreditation standards regarding graduation put in place this year moved more quickly than with the usual phase-in period, which is causing teachers stress and making the division appear to be failing to meet standards. The School Board is encouraging Dr. Reid to build a system to meet the new standards while collecting data on the change.

Ally Baldassari clarified that her concern is not with aligning to the Strategic Plan per se, but that the ACSD's subcommittees now represent goals to the Strategic Plan so that the entire committee is working on the School Board charge. She said that the old subcommittee structure was better aligned to the state mandate, which is to identify needs, set priorities, review policy, and interpret plans to the community. Ms. Sizemore-Heizer replied that the committee is still able to work on its state mandate and that the subcommittees do not need to be aligned to the Strategic Plan, but that the recommendations do.

Jay Berkenbilt said that the ACSD will want to make recommendations to the School Board regarding issues it feels have been overlooked, and wonders how best to make sure those issues do not get lost. He noted that he does appreciate the structure to be able to give the School Board recommendations that it can use. Ms. Sizemore-Heizer said it would be difficult for her to see an issue that would not fit within the given structure. She also noted that public comment at School Board meetings is an excellent way to raise special education issues; she often feels as if she is the lone voice for special education issues, and that providing background information to other School Board members throughout the year would help prime them for receiving the ACSDs recommendations at the end of the school year.

Amanda Campbell asked for consistent policies on the grading policy for students who do not work at grade level. Ms. Sizemore-Heizer said her understanding is that the grading policy applies to all students, but she will look into the issue.

Joanne Walton asked if the School Board will offer an inclusive schools proclamation this year. Ms. Sizemore-Heizer said it will be offered in December, and that she will also offer a neurodiversity proclamation again. Regarding the grading policy, Ms. Walton asked if a failing grade will remain on a transcript even if a student has successfully retaken a class. Ms. Sizemore-Heizer said that the issue is an operational matter rather than a policy one so that it does not fall within the School Board's purview.

Kristine Bennett asked if public comment needs to be aligned with the School Board charge. Ms. Sizemore-Heizer said that it does not.

Holly Stearns asked ACSD members to think of the new subcommittee structure as a change in structure rather than substance. The goal is to align with the Strategic Plan structurally, but that the substance the committee considers remains the same, and that no issue raised by a subcommittee will be denied inclusion in the final report or in a supplemental report to the School Board.

## **Family Resource Center (FRC) Updates**

Dr. Shannon Anderson reported the following, noting that all information is available on the FRC website:

1. The FRC is interviewing for a specialist position (though did not specify which specialist).
2. The FRC continues to host its popular SibShops workshops, which are for siblings of special education students. The FRC has also hosted SibTeams, which are not yet as popular.
3. The FRC hosted Kirk Martin for a session entitled, "Stop the Shame Cycle," which was also very popular.
4. The FRC hosted a webinar for families of students who use the adapted literacy curriculum. Only 18 families attended, which represents a low turnout for an FRC session. They believe that is because the demographic for this topic is small.
5. The FRC hosted a webinar on executive functioning in Arabic, which the Arabic community had requested.
6. A session on building resilience had high attendance.
7. The FRC will host a session about starting conversations with students about drug use.

Amanda Campbell said she is concerned by the number of attendees for the adapted curriculum literacy session. She said it is an important issue for many families but that the FRC only reached a small percentage of them. Dr. Anderson said she would look into sending a link to the webinar to families of special education students.

Kristine Bennett noted concerns she had heard from families about digital citizenship, and asked if the FRC would be addressing that issue. Dr. Anderson said she had not heard that concern from parents but agrees that it is an important topic, and one that they covered last year and will cover again in the spring.

## **DSS Updates**

Mr. Bloom gave a PowerPoint presentation, which is attached to these minutes. He discussed basal resources for students on the adapted curriculum, updates on work to support twice exceptional (2E) learners, and updates on COVID-19 compensatory services.

Ms. Schaefer reported that high school students who have IEPs or 504 Plans received an email the day prior regarding additional tutoring. This tutoring is different from division-wide tutoring; it is just for high school students and limited opportunities are available. DSS received 300 positive responses within 24 hours.

Lauren McCaughey asked whether Mr. Bloom had an update on the possibility of a 2E center, which is what she feels many 2E students desperately need. Mr. Bloom believes a group has convened to assess the possibility. Neither he nor Dr. Edmunds-Heard knew the specifics of that meeting but offered to find out more.

Amanda Campbell asked for an update on emergency evacuation procedures for students with disabilities, both during drills and actual emergencies. Mr. Bloom said he would find out more information.

## **Old Business**

Subcommittee chairs gave their monthly reports. All reported that having an extended amount of time to work on subcommittee business before the main meeting was helpful.

1. Strong Start: PreK-12 looked at the baseline data report and brainstormed questions regarding pre-K support
2. Safe, Supported, Included, and Empowered discussed the issues of absenteeism and disproportionate discipline
3. Academic Growth and Excellence discussed virtual learning and the types of day structure in schools
4. Equitable Access and Opportunity discussed data collection points and how to divide responsibilities as they still do not have a subcommittee chair
5. Leading for Tomorrow's Innovation discussed speakers for December, including a representative of the ARC of Northern Virginia, parents of special education students, and staff members. The subcommittee also wants to connect with the Community Services Board and will reach out to Daniel Cronnell.

Ms. Schaefer reported that she provided two policies for the ACSD to review: 2670, Free Appropriate Education for Students with Disabilities and 2671, Multi-Agency Placements for Children with Disabilities. She asked for ACSD input by the December meeting; Ally Baldassari noted that ACSD operational requirements would prevent that from occurring. Holly Stearns said the ACSD Chair will assign the policies to the appropriate subcommittee for review. Lauren McCaughey asked why DSS had not shared these policies with the ACSD prior to sending them to the School Board. Ms. Sizemore-Heizer said she saw the policies in the Governance Committee and requested that they be reviewed by the ACSD in April. Ms. McCaughey asked Mr. Bloom why this situation continues to occur; Mr. Bloom replied that the reason in this case may be that the Governance Committee, and not the full School Board, had reviewed the policy and it was not yet up for a vote.

## **New Business**

The ACSD's chair and vice chair propose hosting the ACSD's first in a series of town hall meetings in January. They will discuss what that meeting will look like and have further information in December, but invite input from committee members.

## **Member Time**

Ally Baldassari reported that the Special Education Parent Teacher Association (SEPTA) IEPalooza would be next Saturday at Luther Jackson Middle School from 9 am to 12:30 pm. Also, SEPTA has awarded its fall mini-grants and will be offering more in the spring.

Joanne Walton noted that December 2-6 will be Inclusive Schools Week.

### **Closing Remarks**

The Vice Chair thanked attendees for their participation and adjourned the meeting at 9:40 p.m.

### **Action Items**

1. Mr. Bloom will follow up on information regarding a 2E center and evacuation procedures for students with disabilities.
2. Ms. Zielinski will assign the two DSS policies to the appropriate subcommittee for review.
3. Ms. Zielinski and Ms. Stearns will plan for the January town hall meeting.