



VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Report to the Commission on Youth

Barriers and Recommendations to Serving Virginia Students with Disabilities in their Local Public Schools

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**DIVISION OF SPECIAL EDUCATION AND STUDENT SERVICES
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Introduction

During the 2015 General Assembly session, The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) was tasked to convene an interagency workgroup to assess the barriers to serving students with disabilities in their local public schools. Language in the budget amendment stipulated that the workgroup shall examine existing policies and funding formulas which include the following:

- school divisions' program requirements
- localities' composite indices
- local *Children's Services Act* (CSA) match rate allocations
- local CSA rate setting practices
- the impact of caps on support positions
- policies for transitioning students back to the public school
- funding for local educational programming based on models which are collaborative and create savings for both local and state government while providing youth an educational option within their communities.

On Thursday, September 29, 2016, the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) conducted a comprehensive stakeholder meeting with over 30 participants from a wide variety of backgrounds. The VDOE used a facilitated process developed by the National Association of State Directors of Special education called “Leading by Convening” in which a series of core guided questions were asked during whole and small group work. The following report is a summary of the responses received from both work groups (whole and small). The core guided questions were as follows:

1. **What is the vision for the future? (Whole Group)**
 - a. In five years what would you like to see concerning serving students with disabilities in their local public schools?
2. **What is the current practice in Virginia for supporting students with disabilities in their local public schools? (Whole Group)**
3. **What are the barriers to serving more students with disabilities in their local public schools? (Small Group with report out to Whole Group)**
4. **What information is needed to move forward to serve more students with disabilities in their local public schools? (Small Group with report out to Whole Group)?**
 - a. How to get it?
 - b. Where to get it?
 - c. How much will it cost?
 - d. Who needs to get it?

5. **What shared work could unite us to serve more students with disabilities in their local public schools? (Small Group with report out to Whole Group?)**
- a. What solutions and or recommendations to solve the identified barriers?
 - i. Who, what, when and how?
 - ii. What skills are needed to move forward?
 - b. What processes need to be in place to support acquisition of knowledge and skills for those interested?

Stakeholders

Organizations Represented:

- Virginia Association of School Superintendents (VASS)
- Virginia Association of Independent Special education Facilities (VAISEF)
- Virginia Association of Counties (VACO)
- Autism Center of Excellence at Virginia Commonwealth University
- ARC of Virginia
- Virginia School Boards Association (VSBA)
- Virginia Education Association (VEA)
- Virginia Municipal League (VML)
- Virginia Association of Elementary School Principals (VAESP)
- Virginia Association of Secondary School Principals (VASSP)
- Virginia Council of Administrators for Special education (VCASE)
- Parent Education Advocacy Training Center (PEATC)
- Partnership for People with Disabilities
- Higher Education - VCU, William and Mary

State Agencies:

- Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services
- Department of the Blind and Vision Impaired
- Department of Rehabilitative Services
- Virginia Board for People with Disabilities
- Virginia School for the Deaf and Blind
- Children’s Services Act

Parents of Children with Disabilities

Virginia House of Delegates: Delegate Richard “Dickie” Bell
 Virginia Senate: Senator David Marsden

Structure of the Report

This report will be structured in five sections: 1) Vision; 2) Current Practice; 3) Barriers; 4) Additional Information Needed; and 5) Recommendations. Under most of the sections all the responses from stakeholders will be categorized under the following headings: 1) Fiscal/Financial; 2) Beliefs and Attitudes; 3) Policy and Practices; 4) Professional Development and Technical Assistance. Some of the information was also classified by whether the information listed was a Technical or Adaptive Issue.

- Technical Issue: Can be solved by the right information or expert advice.
- Adaptive Issue: Need different accommodations for different situations.

The information listed in this report is the exact responses provided by the stakeholders and have not been vetted or paraphrased by VDOE staff.

Section 1: What is the vision for the future?

I. Beliefs and Attitudes

- Equality in services no matter where you live. Equal Access to services.
- Regardless of where students are educated, their home community is their home community
- All students need an environment that suits their needs
- An attitude shift to “these are OUR kids” across the community and school This mindset in teacher training programs, and for school trying to get students back
- In public school there will be no separate hallways/trailers for special education students. The leadership for special education should come from top down and leadership should support having special needs students in their schools
- Special education students are able to attend their neighborhood schools and this should be the ultimate goal of leadership via training and through fiscal review
- Disproportionality for minority students, particularly black boys, in discipline and in identification
- Develop plans for removing accommodations overtime and moving toward better skills
- Not one-size fits all- alternative options for instruction
- Students with disabilities should be able to attend college and/or have valued employment options by having schools that establish high expectations, using universal design for learning (UDL), being taught the hidden curriculum and an appreciation for diversity
- Ownership of students with disabilities by all teachers and administrators- build collaborative relationships

II. Policy and Practices

- Collaboration between private day and Local Education Agencies (LEA) to measure student progress. Potential VAISEF and VDOE collaboration
- No staffing long term substitute teachers to work with special needs students
- Developing a system of support to keep students in general education classroom and provide supported employment options
- Access to expertise
- Least Restrictive Environment is more than just where the classroom is located- we need to look at all needs of the child (social, emotional, etc.)
- Need qualified teachers
- More partnerships between public and private sector in supporting students with disabilities
- Workforce readiness for all students
- Remember the continuum of service options at the school division level

- Realize that one size does not fit all (environment)
- Work to retain good teachers
- Consistency and coordination for transitioning back to schools. What happens when the student is ready but the school is not?

III. Fiscal/Financial

- Change the current poorly designed misaligned funding system-alignment of the financial system with the goal to keep students in the public school
- Collaboration and leadership to look at the structure surrounding funding for local special education programs. Providing support for innovation
- Much greater funding from Federal Government
- More funding resources for public schools to help provide resources and services for students with disabilities
- Have all resources we need (financial, qualified teachers, etc.)
- Make teacher salaries more competitive
- Public schools have the resources to better service students to produce better outcomes

IV. Professional Development and Technical Assistance

- University training that leads to dual certification in special education and content areas so that ALL teachers at the high school level can do special education
- More cross training and peer support
- Needs to be expectations for teachers to stay up to date on current resources, programs, skills, etc.
- Stop eliminating classes because we don't have a teacher
- Common language and frameworks are needed for continuum of services
- Great collaboration with outside professionals (professionals who are not educators)
- Detailed plans for accommodations- this means better access to extra and co-curricular activities and that no plans are one size fits all
- More training for teachers at preservice level (in college)-school leadership should not staff new teachers in the most challenging schools or with students with the most involved disabilities

Section 2: What is the current practice in Virginia for supporting students with disabilities in their local public schools?

I. Beliefs and Attitudes

- Preschool and early intervention is increasing inclusive opportunities. School age programs need to build on that philosophy
- Pockets of excellence throughout the state
- Parents/student experience a tradeoff. Either participate in an unprepared LEA and have a sense of community or attend a private day that meets the student's needs but does not part of the student's community
- Thin family support
- Lack of resources and support systems for families
- Some families have a broader view of students with disabilities and others do not have a point of reference (sense of what students with disabilities can do)
- Support system for families not consistent
- The current attitude and beliefs about special education is better at the elementary level however these attitudes change as students get older. Specifically, Virginia families start off wanting full inclusion for their children and with having high expectations for their children, however once these expectations are lowered by poor experiences with the schools then the parents, teachers, and administrators lose interest and trust in the system and are not as open to full inclusion
- There was an early 1990's program that promoted and recruited special education teachers particularly among minorities, it would be great to duplicate such a program
- Welcomed as a parent (Hanover), but believe that outside partnership should be increased, (especially for students with autism) to assist with Functional Behavior Assessments, goal development and accommodations
- Inclusion depends on 1) individual personal experiences 2) beliefs by administrators- some do not want students with disabilities in their building

II. Policy and Practices

- Transition services from high school to adult services should be coordinated, including behavior support and employment
- Definition of inclusion varies and is based on own personal experiences
- Variable knowledge, skills, and abilities
- Quality of services depends on location
- Inconsistencies and gaps in the continuum
- Cooperative Agreements with schools have been developed by some agencies/organization, but teachers are not allowed to come to free training (ex. Deaf/blind training), special education directs support is needed
- Schools may not have access to expertise

III. Fiscal/Financial

- Further from home (private day, out of state) equals an increase in money for education
- Difficult attracting special education teachers
- Having to contract services and paying high fees
- Funding resources not aligned to student needs

IV. Professional Development and Technical Assistance

- The Department of Education has invested in networks, and established great models, for example the Training and Technical Assistance Centers (TTAC)
- George Mason and Radford University have done an excellent job of providing dual degrees in content and special education and this should be duplicated by other institutions
- TTAC system is a major strength. Need flexibility to work with schools in the “bubble” to prevent slippage into warning status
- Creative ideas are coming out (Montgomery County) and need to share

Section 3: What are the barriers to serving more students with disabilities in their local public schools?

I. Fiscal/Financial Barriers

Technical:

- Investing in additional services and prevention is more cost effective than incarceration
- Efficient use of resources, a lot of special education money is leaving divisions
- Unequal funding, resources, expertise, and wraparound services
- It is a slow shift to look at education as an investment rather than an expense
- Don't have enough information to evaluate ways to identify and define the effective fixes to funding stream
- Funding, supervision and problem solving are driven by crisis
- Legal barriers exist for allowing funds to flow freely
- IDEA and Children's Services Act (CSA) construction
- Funding through CSA should be more flexible to address- 1) in-state vs. out-state placement 2) variability between LEAs

Adaptive:

- Structure of CSA incentivizes sending children out of division. This reduces flexibility and opportunities for innovation within the division
- To access funds, student must leave LEA
- Current funding formula will continue inequity
- Where to find money
- Providing flexibility to localities
- Money that goes to regional programs
- Funding follows program not the child. This discourages collaboration and encourages out placement. It also discourages transition back to public school and creativity
- Tax based generated education
- Conservative state Medicaid plans
- Needs are great but there is little money to meet the needs
- Unclear role of government

II. Beliefs and Attitudes Barriers

Technical:

- Leadership needs to recognize the importance of all personnel and their role in supporting students
- Need to promote success stories and replicate and celebrate success
- Identifying a definition for least restrictive environment
- Monitoring placements and doing discharge planning for privately placed students for educational reasons. Also some parents don't want students to return to the public school. The parents and schools don't communicate. Expectations need to change to limit the amount of time that students are privately placed

- No processes or procedures by which children are returned to public schools and creating standards for return
- Enrollment procedures
- Out of division placement in group homes causes confusion regarding enrollment
- Transfer issues and confusion
- Schools don't have standards for other service providers such as rations or best practices
- Creating better infrastructure to serve students
- Communication break-down between special education directors, principals and teachers
- Lack of knowledge by parents of students with disabilities and students about diploma options, career and technical education and other program options

Adaptive:

- Accountability and visibility of problems and demands of special education programs outweigh benefits
- Risks without recognition
- Waiting to fail model for receiving TTAC support
- Special education is a multifaceted field that requires a lot of knowledge and resources
- Special education programs have to pick and choose what they can do
- Parents do not feel welcome in some schools
- Philosophy is not to look at individual student all along but instead to wait till it becomes a problem
- Beliefs surrounding least restrictive environment
- Once a child is in private placement the school doesn't want them to return
- Stigmas about children with mental health issues
- Not enough time for teachers to communicate about students. There is limited communication about other services
- Limited time for professional development and training
- Conflicting views: Parents expectations verses school expectations

III. Policy and Practice Barriers

Technical:

- A lot of responsibility placed on schools without collaboration with private and other public entities
- Parent consent sometimes negatively impacts students returning to schools
- Depending on LEA, certain policies aren't implemented
- Lack of qualified applicants 1) training programs 2) salaries 3) Too broad of training-need more specialization in special education vs general curriculum-
- Lack of training of general education teachers and administrators in special education at the pre-service and in-service level including disability awareness, special education process and language

Adaptive:

- Competing priorities between the state and localities
- Focus is on state testing outcomes

IV. PD and Technical Assistance Barriers**Technical:**

- Lack of support for special education teachers
- Administrators that do not have a special education background
- Co-teaching, seeing less involvement from special education teacher
- Professional development models at the local level are inferior
- Parents are unaware of their power and influence in IEP meetings
- Parent understanding of what agencies are required to do/provide vs what the parent wants
- Lack of transition plans
- Thinking of the continuum as a continuum of placements rather than a continuum of services and supports
- The idea that more is better
- Ability for people to identify the environmental factors that affects the student rather than looking to fix the student
- Inadequate technical assistance to proactively address challenges before they become a crisis at local level
- Collaboration with other professionals is driven by level of crisis
- Inadequate teacher preparation
- Lack of coordination across professional disciplines
- Lack of support by site-based management

Adaptive:

- Improved preservice training for teachers and leadership
- Compliance and paperwork demands
- Leadership to prioritize professional development to the front end
- Prioritize coaching but need additional time
- Common planning time
- Maintaining parent engagement
- Access to expertise, systems of supports and other resources
- Crisis oriented supervision and management rather than being proactive and solution oriented from beginning
- The good teaching techniques especially with regard to behavior are called “special education” where they are really just good teaching. This is a huge barrier to inclusion in that it still puts people into silos
- Focus is on fixing things
- Don’t always keep pace with developmental changes that happen across lifespan and the changing society

- There is no time to mentor
- There are teacher shortages
- Limited monetary resources
- There is little value placed on teachers or assistants
- Schools aren't using best practices
- High teacher turnover; need to find out why turnover is so high is it because teachers are leaving the field? Teachers aren't supported? Not rewarding?
- Training teachers placed in the content subject matter classes than special education classrooms only
- More Board Certified Behavior Analysts are needed
- Professional development is not a priority in the school or division
- Not enough co-teaching and collaborative teaching

Section 4: What information is needed to move forward to serve more students with disabilities in their local public schools?**Responses:**

- Where do we get the most bang for our buck with interventions?
- What states are using innovative funding? Could this be a JLARC study?
- Teacher/Administrator Training programs. How much is specific to students with disabilities and differentiated instruction taught in the curriculum?
- What do teacher prep programs offer? (CEEDAR Center is a possible resource)
- For teachers that take alternate routes to licensure, where are they coming from? Are they addressing the same issues as standard teacher preparation programs? Do they report the same data as traditional teacher preparation programs?
- How many students transition back to LEAs after being in private day placements?
- How do we get data on children who need differentiated instruction?
- More information about Universal Design of Learning is needed
- More information about the “right way” or different models to distribute funding is needed
- Information about changing the funding approach because there is inequality in the composite index due to varying population and job markets in different localities
- How do we synchronize data between state departments so that information can follow students through adulthood
- How can we allow Medicaid supports in the classroom which would allow teachers to focus on teaching
- How do we make definitions consistent among state departments
- How does the composite index interplay with this process?
- What is the relationship between local and state funding and the lack of equity among divisions?
- Evaluate current funding to special education, the use and outcomes, including Standards Of Quality, CSA, regional tuition reimbursement programs
- What are Higher Education licensure requirements and teacher retention initiatives for special education such as those they have for the STEM program

Section 5: What are some solutions and or recommendations to solve the identified barriers to serving students with disabilities in their local public school?**Responses:****I. Beliefs and Attitudes**

- Create cultures in schools that incentivize creativity and flexibility, such as develop creative ways to facilitate peer support vs. one-on-one assistants

II. Policy and Practices

- Improve cross agency/systems collaboration and processes
- Streamline definitions and indicators to align across agencies/systems (DOE, LEA, DBHDS, DARS, DMAS, etc.)
- Identify supports, resources and preventative strategies to promote student retention
- Develop planning and implementation processes that focus on individual student needs across agencies (avoid one size fits all approaches)
- Develop and track meaningful outcome indicators and use them to inform practice and policy
- Strengthen IEP process to focus on student needs rather than what is available
- Look at previous studies for recommendations that were not adopted
- There needs to be shared definitions among the agencies or at least create a process around making the terms have the same meaning
- State should provide direction to local systems of care regarding how to collaborate and work together in order to help parents (namely CSA FAPT Teams and school divisions)
- Collaboration between private and public agencies should also be encouraged so that wraparound services can be provided in the school. This would help with transition
- Propose a policy that would assist CSA build relationships with the public schools across localities

III. Fiscal/Financial

- Increase special education funding as part of governors budget Increase special education funding as part of governors recommendation
- Align funding streams with the goal of keeping students in inclusive settings in their community
- Provide additional resources to build capacity to school divisions and wrap around services
- Change funding structure so that it doesn't reward responding to crisis and instead focuses on student needs.
- Establish "money follows the child" funding systems.
- Funding goes to keep child in public school first.
- Data should be collected about how services are being funded
- State should create best practices, and checks and balances regarding funding streams

- Provide incentives for dual endorsements of teachers in both special education and regular education
- Provide incentives to recruit and retain teachers, i.e. signing bonuses, moving experiences, etc.

IV. Professional Development and Technical Assistance

- Find exemplars of localities doing it well and share
- Very important that professional development and training includes practice/feedback component-not just didactic training
- Extensive highly qualified behavioral skills in a credentialed person or persons, such as a Board Certified Behavior Analyst in every school
- Provide better training for ALL educators on the skills sets that we know lead to better outcomes for students especially with respect to behavior.
- Need new teacher licensure regulations to look at professional licenses and program approval
- More training is needed for parents on inclusion
- Parent organizations can be used and united so that a one clear message is being sent to all parents
- Parents need to be made aware of different organizations and funding streams to help children
- All available resources for special needs students should be mapped as well as how to access these resources and what purpose they serve
- Enhance and improve current pre-service and in-service training and professional development for all licensed professionals annually and on-going
- Improve in-service training for support staff such as instructional assistants, etc. by local division and VDOE through web-based and blended models of delivery