Introduction

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that each state establish and maintain an advisory panel for the purpose of advising the state education agency (SEA) regarding the education of eligible children with disabilities.

The Alabama Special Education Advisory Panel (SEAP) is comprised of parents, persons with disabilities, educators, and administrators as well as representatives from public and private agencies. The Panel advises the Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE), Special Education Services (SES) Section on the unmet needs related to the education of children with disabilities within the State and provides feedback on any rules or regulations proposed by the State regarding special education. The Panel is a critical partner in the development of the State Performance Plan (SPP) and Annual Performance Report (APR) for Alabama. The Panel also advises the State Director on the improvement activities that need to be developed and implemented in order to improve outcomes for students with disabilities. Each year, members review data on the improvement activities included in the SPP and APR and make suggestions for updates to the activities and targets.

SEAP Overview of 2020-2021

The Special Education Advisory Panel had the obligation to meet three to four times during school year 2020-2021, and the Panel fulfilled the obligation by meeting virtually for a total of four times. During the school year, training was made available for the Panel by ALSDE staff regarding significant disproportionality and ALSDE COVID-19 resources, along with Distance Learning resources. The SES Director updated the Panel regarding the ALSDE SES reorganization to include an Instructional Support Team, Alabama Achieves, the MEGA conference and the COVID-19 memo. Additionally, the ALSDE presented to the Panel information about CARES funds, improving remote learning and the “Roadmap to Reopening Schools.”

The public comment process provided an opportunity for constituents of Alabama to provide feedback on desired educational improvements and to identify practices that are currently working well for students with disabilities. The receipt and review of public comments from the community by the Panel stands to be an essential duty. There were several public comments received for the September 2, 2020, meeting, which addressed concerns of services to students with disabilities related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some topics represented were related services provided to individuals with disabilities, regression of student with disabilities, options of face-to-face school with proper guidelines (consideration for small classrooms, adult travel to classrooms, hybrid classrooms) and transportation options for IEP meetings when schools have closed.

- There were no public comments received for the October 14, 2020, meeting.
- There were no public comments received for the January 20, 2021, meeting.
- There were no public comments received for the April 21, 2021, meeting.
Purpose, Duties, and Responsibilities of SEAP

The purpose of the SEAP is described in the provisions of 20 USC section 1412(a)(21) and 34 CFR sections 300.164 -300.169: to advise the ALSDE, SES section on issues related to special education, and to promote communication and cooperation among individuals involved with children and youth with disabilities. The following are the roles and responsibilities of the Advisory Panel as listed in IDEA CFR 300.169:

- Advise the State educational agency (SEA) of unmet needs within the State in the education of children and youth with disabilities. (300.169(a))
- Comment publicly on any rules or regulations proposed by the State regarding the education of children with disabilities. (300.169(b))
- Advise the SEA in developing evaluations and reporting on data to the Secretary under 618. (300.169(c))
- Advise the SEA in developing corrective action plans to address findings identified in federal monitoring reports. (300.169(d))
- Advise the SEA in developing and implementing policies relating to the coordination of services for children with disabilities. (300.169(e))
- Waiver of non-supplant requirement: State must consult with the Advisory Panel regarding provisions of FAPE. (300.164(c)(4))

Status of Special Education in Alabama

The IDEA requires that the U.S. Secretary of Education make an annual determination as to whether each state meets the requirements of the statute based on the data submitted in the APR and other available information. The U.S. Department of Education (U.S. DOE), Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) makes annual determinations in implementing Part B of the IDEA according to the following categories: “Meets Requirements, Needs Assistance, Needs Intervention, or Needs Substantial Intervention.” This status determination is based on the totality of the state’s data and information, revised State Performance Plan, state-reported data, and other publicly available information to include the National Assessment on Educational Progress (NAEP) reading and math assessments and the number of students with disabilities who exited an educational program with a regular high school diploma. Each APR submission is based on the most current available data, which include lag year data (i.e., data from the previous school year). According to the 2021 state determination, based on the FFY 2019 APR submission, the U. S. DOE, OSEP, has determined that under the IDEA, Section 616(d)(2)(A)(i) the ALSDE needs assistance in meeting the requirements of Part B of the IDEA. Part of the actions a state must take is to report on the technical assistance received and the actions the state took as a result of the technical assistance.

The ALSDE is working to improve outcomes for students with disabilities by receiving technical assistance from several entities including two national centers. The ALSDE is partnering with the Region Seven Comprehensive Center (R7CC) to expand and strengthen the state and regional literacy coaching cadre; to promote and scale up effective mathematics practices, policies, and procedures; and to improve the academic achievement of English learners (EL), which include children with disabilities. Through the “Grades PK-3 Literacy Project,” Alabama will improve student proficiency by building the capacity of educators statewide to deliver instruction grounded in evidence-based literacy practices.
As a result of the “Improving Student Excellence in Math Project,” the ALSDE will increase knowledge of effective math practices, implement an effective math coaching model with local education agencies (LEAs), and increase the number of Grades K-5 students proficient in math. Another part of Alabama’s work with R7CC is the “Improving EL Academic Achievement Project” that has yielded increased guidance, support, and technical assistance to help educators effectively plan for the education of multilingual learners.

Also, the ALSDE, SES has been working with the National Center for Systemic Improvement to design a new system of general supervision, shifting the focus of LEA monitoring to create a balance between compliance and results for children with disabilities. The ALSDE, SES, will conduct integrated monitoring based on a cyclical schedule and starting this school year, provide differentiated support to LEAs based on low, medium, and high risk. The LEA risk is identified through results indicator data and the differentiated levels of support are universal, targeted, and intensive. The technical assistance the ALSDE is receiving from these outstanding national centers, and many of the actions taken as a result, are geared toward improving results and outcomes for children with disabilities in Alabama.

Special Education Advisory Panel Membership

The 2019-2020 Panel members represented a wide array of knowledge, background, and opinions. The Panel membership was comprised of parents of students with disabilities and individuals with disabilities (51%), and the remaining membership of the Panel (49%) included representatives from the state protection and advocacy agency, the parent training and information center, PART C, local school administrators, representatives from higher education and charter public school. In addition, relevant state agencies, including individuals from the Departments Juvenile Justice and Corrections, Labor, Vocational Rehabilitation, and Family and Children Services.

SEAP Committees

The standing committees of the Panel met on a continuous basis in conjunction with each quarterly meeting of the full panel. Other subcommittees: Mental Health committee, Public Relations committee, Preschool committee, and Transition committee, each provided feedback to the Panel chairperson and/or panel. The Panel recognized that in order to ensure that the work of the committees remain relevant to the needs of students and current priorities identified they needed to revisit the utility of the standing committees. Therefore, the Panel created additional committees for the upcoming school year: Stakeholder and Public Engagement and Student Achievement and Performance Data. The Stakeholder and Public Engagement committee will share, communicate, disseminate, and oversee information about operations, membership, student unmet needs, Panel priorities and other applicable areas in accessible formats through the website, annual report, dissemination networks or other platforms, seek public comment for consideration, and develop communication tools for stakeholders. The Student Achievement and Performance Data committee will identify needed data, what data is available, report-review of student achievement and outcome data, and provide this data to the Panel on an ongoing consistent basis.
Summary of Committee Activities

➢ The Membership committee reviewed and recommended new applicants for SEAP membership to the Superintendent of Education.
➢ The Bylaws committee amended and revised SEAP Bylaws.

SEAP Recommendations and Feedback

Throughout the year the Panel members made a concerted effort with multiple recommendations.
➢ Significant Disproportionality:
  o Recommended that SES use a minimum cell size of 10 and an end n-size of 30
  o Recommended that SES reduce the risk ratio from 5.0 to 3.0
➢ FY 2019 SPP/APR:
  o The Panel had no recommendations for the FY 2019 APR

Anticipated Panel Vacancies

The Panel anticipates vacancies in five parent positions and a representative of a business organization concerned with the provision of transition services.