

June 26, 2023

Norfolk Public Schools

800 East City Hall Avenue, Suite 1201

Norfolk, Virginia 23510

Dear School Board Chair Dr. Martin, School Board Members, and Superintendent Dr. Byrdsong:

On behalf of the Norfolk Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC), we submit this letter as the 2023 Annual Report. The Committee's recommendations highlight data from the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) School Quality Profile, Norfolk City Public Schools Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2021 Special Education Performance Report, Annual Equity Report for Policy DAB-Equity December 2022, peer-reviewed research, and other data sources. While there are many challenges facing special education (e.g., critical teacher shortage, funding), this report will amplify the voices of children who have been ignored for far too long, students of color and students of color with disabilities, or those considered multiply marginalized. A multiply marginalized student is one who has interlocking identities like race or ethnicity, dis/ability, gender, and socioeconomic status and has been pushed to the outer edge of society historically (Annamma et al., 2019). Norfolk Public Schools (NPS) serve many students who are considered multiply marginalized.

During the 2022-2023 academic school year, NPS served 27, 330 students, more than 75% of whom were students of color (VDOE School Quality Profile, 2022). Of the nearly 30,000 students, approximately 14% were students with disabilities, and 60.9% were economically disadvantaged. According to the VDOE School Quality Profile (2022), a student is considered economically disadvantaged when he or she is (a) eligible for Free/Reduced Meals, (b) receives Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), (c) eligible for Medicaid, or (d) a migrant or

is experiencing homelessness. Unfortunately, Norfolk has one of the highest percentages of families with children living below the poverty line in the region ([Greater Hampton Roads Dashboard, 2023](#)).

Poverty is devastating and traumatic. Poverty is associated with food insecurity, inadequate living conditions, homelessness, minimum wage jobs, less-than-optimal health outcomes, and lower educational attainment ([Greater Hampton Roads Dashboard, 2023](#)). NPS students in high-poverty zip codes are also more likely to have inexperienced, out-of-field, and provisionally licensed teachers than their peers who attend low-poverty schools (VDOE School Quality Profile, 2022). Thus, living in impoverished communities can hinder academic success for students of color and multiply marginalized students. For years, NPS multiply marginalized students have been disproportionately subjected to harsher discipline practices and lagged behind their more affluent peers academically.

While Black students represented nearly 57% of the total student population, they made up 80% of short-term suspensions (Annual Equity Report for Policy DAB-Equity December 2022). Academically, only 52% of Black and 58% of Hispanic students passed state reading tests compared to 80% of their white counterparts ([VDOE School Quality Profile, 2022](#)). Interestingly, the economically disadvantaged shared the same reading pass rate as Black students ([VDOE School Quality Profile, 2022](#)). NPS FFY 2021 Special Education Performance Report data indicated that only 26.85% of 4th-grade and 16.94% of 8th-grade students with disabilities were math proficient. Furthermore, about 50% of 4<sup>th</sup> graders, 70% of 8<sup>th</sup> graders, and 60% of 12<sup>th</sup> graders with disabilities were not proficient readers.

An inability to read at grade level may impact high school diploma options and post-secondary opportunities. Nearly 57% of NPS students with disabilities graduated with a regular

high school diploma, and only 45% of students with disabilities were enrolled in college or obtained competitive employment within one year of leaving high school. Youth not employed or significantly active in the community are more likely to interact with law enforcement and the juvenile justice system.

On any given day in this nation, approximately 55,000 youth reside in juvenile corrections, and many of them are of color. While exact percentages are unavailable, it is estimated that the number of incarcerated youth with disabilities typically ranges from 30 percent to 60 percent, with some estimates as high as 85 percent (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services Blog, 2017). The most common disability categories for youth in juvenile detention centers are specific learning disabilities, emotional or behavioral disorders, intellectual disability, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder ([Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services Blog, 2017](#)). In Virginia, 90.8% of juvenile admissions appeared to have at least one symptom of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, Conduct Disorder, Oppositional Defiance Disorder, or substance use disorder ([Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice Data Resource Guide, 2021](#)). While some juvenile detainees obtain a high school diploma or GED, others re-offend and cycle in and out of the justice system.

Data, as mentioned above, are not meant to view multiply marginalized students through a deficit lens, as none of what they experience on a daily basis happens in a vacuum. Multiply marginalized students' lived experiences are an accumulation of generational missed opportunities due to systemic inequities and residing in a carceral state. Thus, it is imperative for local educational agencies like NPS to reimagine special education programming by centering the voices and experiences of multiply marginalized students and their families while working alongside grassroots organizations to uproot entrenched racial inequities and ableism belief

systems that are implicitly perpetuated in classrooms. NPS can also address systemic issues by providing training in culturally sustaining pedagogy, evidence-based trauma-informed practices, and disability critical race theory or DisCrit. The identified practices will help reframe and shape classroom norms to ensure that all students are empowered, valued, and provided with safe spaces where everyone feels a sense of belonging.

As always, SEAC looks forward to continuing to work with the School Board in its mission to provide the best possible educational outcomes for **ALL** students in Norfolk Public Schools.

In the spirit of collaboration,

*Nicole Anthony*

Dr. Nicole Anthony

SEAC Chair 2022-2023