



Effectiveness Training for
Special Education Advisory Committees

Building Local SEACs for
Better Special Education Services and
Student Outcomes

Report of A Needs Assessment of SEAC Members, Special
Education Directors, and School Board Chairpersons

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Introduction

On February 7, 2005 the Partnership for People with Disabilities in collaboration with the Virginia Department of Education disseminated approximately 1876 Needs Assessment surveys¹. Approximately four hundred surveys were sent to the local Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) Chairpersons, Directors of Special Education, and School Board Chairpersons, of Virginia's 134 school divisions and an additional 1400 copies were mailed to local SEAC Chairpersons for further distribution to each of their local SEAC Members. All respondents were asked to return the Needs Assessment surveys by February 25, 2005. The surveys were coded to indicate the role of the respondent and to identify the region of the state from which they came.

A total of 367 individuals responded to the SEAC Needs Assessment survey providing a 20 percent return rate. Individuals from every region and role replied to the request for feedback and information about their local SEAC. Table 1 details the frequency of survey responses by the role of the respondent and by region of the state. Region 4, the largest region in the state which consists largely of Northern Virginia school divisions, provided the largest number of responses with 73 completed surveys. The largest group by role to receive and return the surveys was local SEAC members.

Table 1. Frequency of Needs Assessment Responses by Role and by Region

*One respondent did not identify their region

<u>ROLE</u>		<u>SEAC Member</u>	<u>Director of Special Education</u>	<u>School Board Chairperson</u>	<u>SEAC Chairperson</u>
Region 1	60	47	2	5	6
Region 2	38	26	5	2	5
Region 3	37	17	13	3	4
Region 4	73	52	9	2	10
Region 5	65	40	12	5	8
Region 6	45	30	7	2	6
Region 7	27	13	8	4	2
Region 8	21	8	9	1	3
Totals	367*	233	65	24	44

¹Due to the nature of SEACs and their varying memberships, Chairpersons were instructed that if the number of copies of the survey supplied was not adequate for their particular SEAC, they could copy additional surveys to accommodate their members or contact the Partnership for additional copies. Therefore we cannot provide an exact total of Needs Assessments that reached the above sample.

The Needs Assessment was separated into two sections. The first section consisted of six statements based upon Virginia Regulations regarding SEACs. Virginia Regulations outline six primary responsibilities for SEACs. These requirements include:

1. advising the local school division of unmet needs in the education of children with disabilities;
2. assisting the local school division in the formulation and development of plans for improving the performance of children with disabilities;
3. participating in the development of priorities and strategies for meeting the identified needs of children with disabilities;
4. submitting periodic reports and recommendations regarding the education of children with disabilities to the division superintendent for transmission to the local school board;
5. assisting the local school division in interpreting plans to the community for meeting the special needs of children with disabilities; and
6. reviewing the policies and procedures for the provision of special education and related services prior to submission to the local school board and VDOE.

In this section of the Needs Assessment survey, participants were asked to rate their SEAC's performance on a five point scale. This scale ranged from "agree very much" to "disagree very much."

The second section of the Needs Assessment survey consisted of eleven items describing potential training and technical assistance needs for SEACs. Respondents were asked to rate their SEAC's performance in specific areas using a five point scale that ranged from "agree very much" to "disagree very much." A copy of the complete Needs Assessment survey is included in Appendix A.

The following is a summary of the results of this Needs Assessment and conclusions based upon the responses of participants. The first section of this report lists respondents' perceptions of SEACs' performance of responsibilities. The second section details the identified training and technical assistance needs of local SEACs. The third section of the report focuses primarily on the six items that the majority of the participants reported as the needs of local SEACs. A more detailed summary of these six needs are provided in both summary and chart form. Lastly, a summary of conclusions and implications for SEACs is offered.

Section 1: Report of Local SEACs Performance of Responsibilities²

1. Advises the local school division of unmet needs in the education of children with disabilities.

The majority of participants (**83%, n =305**) **agreed very much** or **agreed** that their SEAC advises local school division of the unmet needs of children with disabilities. Only **7 percent (n =25)** of participants either **disagreed** or **disagreed very much**.

2. Assists the local school division in the formulation and development of plans for improving performance of children with disabilities.

Sixty five percent of participants (**n =237**) either **agreed very much** or **agreed** their SEAC assists the local school division in the formulation and development of plans for improving performance of children with disabilities. **Sixteen percent** of participants (**n =58**) either **disagreed** or **disagreed very much**.

3. Participates in the development of priorities and strategies for meeting the identified needs of children with disabilities.

Participants largely **agreed very much** or **agreed (64%, n =233)** that their SEAC participates in the development of priorities and strategies for meeting the identified needs of children with disabilities. **Fifteen percent (n =54)** either **disagreed** or **disagreed very much**.

4. Submits periodic reports and recommendations regarding the education of children with disabilities to the division superintendent for transmission to the local school board.

The majority of participants (**67%, n =247**) either **agreed very much** or **agreed**, that their SEAC submits periodic reports and recommendations regarding the education of children with disabilities to the division superintendent. Only **12 percent (n =42)** either **disagreed** or **disagreed very much**.

5. Assists the local school division in interpreting plans to the community for meeting the special needs of children with disabilities for educational services.

More than half (**55%, n =201**) of the participants either **agreed very much** or **agreed** that their local SEAC assists the local school division in interpreting plans to the community for meeting the needs of children with disabilities. **Twenty-one percent (n =77)** either **disagreed** or **disagreed very much**. This was the lowest rated item in this section of the survey.

6. Reviews the policies and procedures for the provision of special education and related services prior to submission to the local school board and the Virginia Department of Education.

Most participants (**70%, n =256**) either **agreed very much** or **agreed** that their SEAC reviews the policies and procedures for the provision of special education and related services prior to submitting them to the local school board and VDOE. Only **11 percent (n =41)** either **disagreed** or **disagreed very much**.

² All percentages listed are based on the overall number of responses

Section 2: Report of Local SEACs' Need for Assistance

1. Assistance with obtaining / maintaining active parental involvement.

An overwhelming majority of participants (**77%, n =283**) **agreed very much or agreed** their SEAC needs assistance with obtaining/maintaining active parental involvement. This was the highest rated item in this section of the survey. Only **9 percent** of participants (**n =35**) **disagreed very much or disagreed** that their local SEAC needs help with this activity.

2. Assistance with clarifying and understanding the Virginia Regulations regarding SEACs.

A little more than half of the participants (**54%, n =198**) either **agreed very much or agreed** their SEAC needs assistance with clarifying and understanding the Virginia Regulations regarding SEACs. **Twenty-three percent** of participants (**n =85**) **disagreed or disagreed very much** that their local SEAC needs help with this activity.

3. Assistance with building consensus.

Only **thirty-three percent** of participants (**n =117**) either **agreed or agreed very much** that their SEAC needs assistance with building consensus. Several individuals (**29%, n =106**) felt **neutral** about this need. **Thirty-one percent** (**n =114**) either **disagreed or disagreed very much** that their local SEAC needs help with this activity.

4. Assistance with team building skills.

Less than one half of the participants (**40%, n =151**) **agreed or agreed very much** that their SEAC needs assistance with team building skills. Many felt **neutral** about this need (**26%, n =97**). **Twenty-eight percent** of participants (**n =103**), either **disagreed or disagreed very much** that their SEAC needs help with this activity.

5. Assistance with establishing by-laws for the advisory committee (including membership roles and responsibilities).

Less than one half of the participants (**41%, n =149**) **agreed or agreed very much** that their SEAC needs assistance with establishing by-laws for the advisory committee. Many participants (**36%, n =133**) **disagreed or disagreed very much** that their SEAC needs help with this activity.

6. Assistance with identifying unmet needs in the education of children with disabilities.

More than half of the participants (**58%, n =212**) either **agreed very much or agreed** that their local SEAC needs assistance with identifying unmet needs in the education of children with disabilities. **Twenty-eight percent** (**n =103**) **disagreed or disagreed very much** that their SEAC needs help with this activity.

7. Assistance with formulating and developing plans for improving performance of children with disabilities.

Participants largely **agreed very much or agreed (63%, $n = 233$)** that their local SEAC needs assistance with formulating and developing plans for improving performance of children with disabilities. Only **Twenty percent ($n = 72$)** either **disagreed or disagreed very much** that their SEAC needs help with this activity.

8. Assistance with developing priorities and strategies for meeting the identified needs of children with disabilities.

More than half of the participants (**59%, $n = 219$)** either **agreed very much or agreed** that their local SEAC needs assistance with developing priorities and strategies for meeting the identified needs of children with disabilities. **Twenty-three percent ($n = 84$)** either **disagreed or disagreed very much** that their SEAC needs help with this activity.

9. Assistance in interpreting plans to the community for meeting the special needs of children with disabilities.

Many participants either **agreed very much or agreed (60%, $n = 220$)** that their local SEAC needs assistance in interpreting plans to the community for meeting the needs of children with disabilities. Only **19 percent ($n = 70$)** either **disagreed or disagreed very much** that their SEAC needs help with this activity.

10. Assistance with reviewing the policies and procedures for the provision of special education and related services before submission to the local school board and the Virginia Department of Education.

Only **forty-six percent** of participants (**$n = 169$)** either **agreed very much or agreed** that their SEAC needs assistance with reviewing the policies and procedures for the provision of special education and related services before submission to the local school board and the Virginia Department of Education. More than one quarter (**28%, $n = 101$)** either **disagreed or disagreed very much** that their SEAC needs help with this activity.

11. Assistance with understanding special education laws and regulations.

Less than one half of the participants (**49%, $n = 179$)** either **agreed very much or agreed** that their SEAC needs assistance with understanding special education laws and regulations. **Thirty percent ($n = 109$)** either **disagreed or disagreed very much** that their SEAC needs help with this activity.

Section 3: Report of the Top Six Areas of Local SEAC Needs

1. The need that was identified at the highest percentage by survey respondents was "obtaining/maintaining active parental involvement."

Agree very much	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Disagree very Much	Don't know	Missing
<i>n</i> = 154 42%	<i>n</i> = 129 35%	<i>n</i> = 39 11%	<i>n</i> = 31 8%	<i>n</i> = 4 1%	<i>n</i> = 6 2%	<i>n</i> = 4 1%

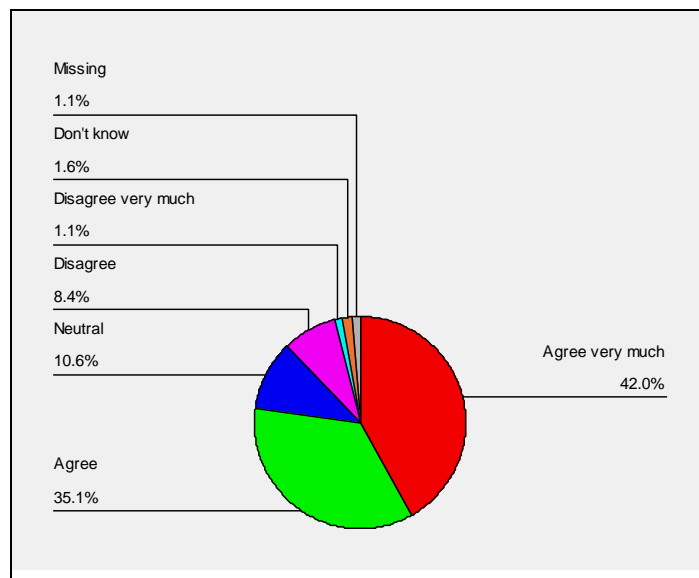
*Percentages have been rounded

An overwhelming majority (77%, *n* = 283) of participants believed their SEAC needed assistance in this area. Selected comments reported by the survey respondents provided insight into the range of issues faced by SEACs in obtaining/maintaining parental involvement.

- *"We have never been able to get parents actively involved in SEAC".*
- *"Attendance at meetings is poor."*
- *"We can't get anyone to consistently participate."*
- *"There is relatively no ethnic diversity on the committee."*
- *"We have tried different times for meetings and to present programs. It is hard to get people to attend."*

Some respondents also identified problems with appropriate and informed involvement.

- *"Most SEAC members cannot divorce themselves from their children's disability and their own personal experience and concern."*
- *"...needs help - parents think it's a gripe session."*
- *"My concern is for our new members. In order for them to fully understand the responsibilities of local SEACs there needs to be an orientation and training period."*



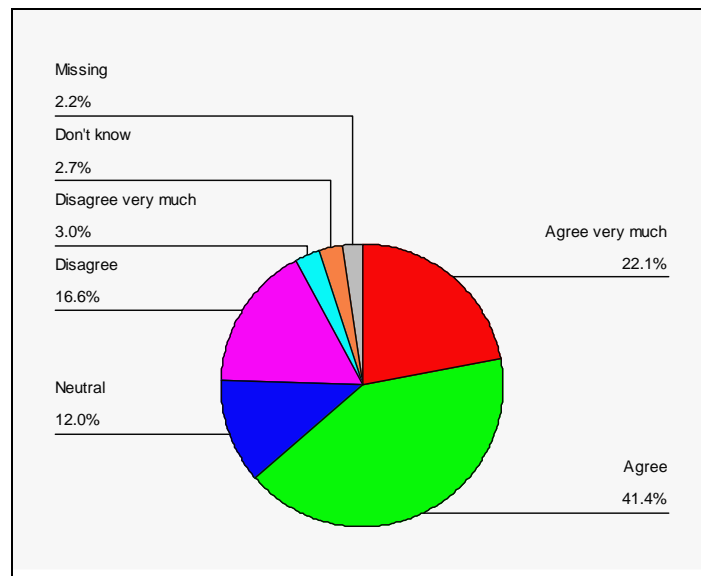
2. The need that was identified at the second highest percentage was "assistance with formulating and developing plans for improving performance of children with disabilities."

Agree very Much	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Disagree very Much	Don't know	Missing
n = 81 22%	n = 152 41%	n = 44 12%	n = 61 17%	n = 11 3%	n = 10 3%	n = 8 2%

*percentages have been rounded

Comments from respondents on this need included:

- *"Our SEAC needs more strategies for implementing action, instead of just discussing issues as much as we do."*
- *"Although the SEAC is a solid group of dedicated parents and advocates it has not achieved much over the last three years."*
- *"We need assistance in how to convince the school board to actually make any of our recommendations which they approve, actually happen. How to write recommendations that get followed. How to extract data out of our school division and other information."*



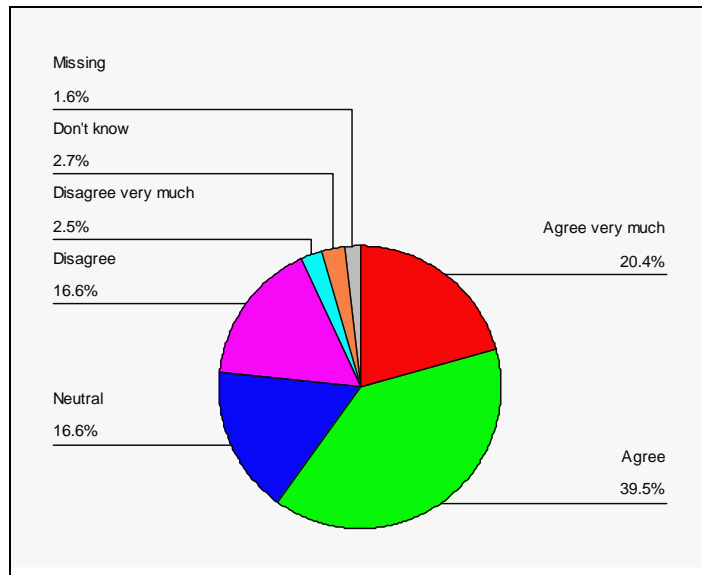
3. The need that was identified at the third highest percentage was "assistance in interpreting plans to the community for meeting the special needs of children with disabilities."

Agree very much	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Disagree very Much	Don't know	Missing
n = 75 20%	n = 145 40%	n = 61 17%	n = 61 17%	n = 9 2%	n = 10 3%	n = 6 2%

*Percentages have been rounded

Issues around communication with parents and the public at large are reported in the comments made by respondents. They included:

- *"...areas of concern: helping to keep parents/community informed of the needs."*
- *"The biggest problem is communication through the schools."*
- *"How to respond to public comment."*



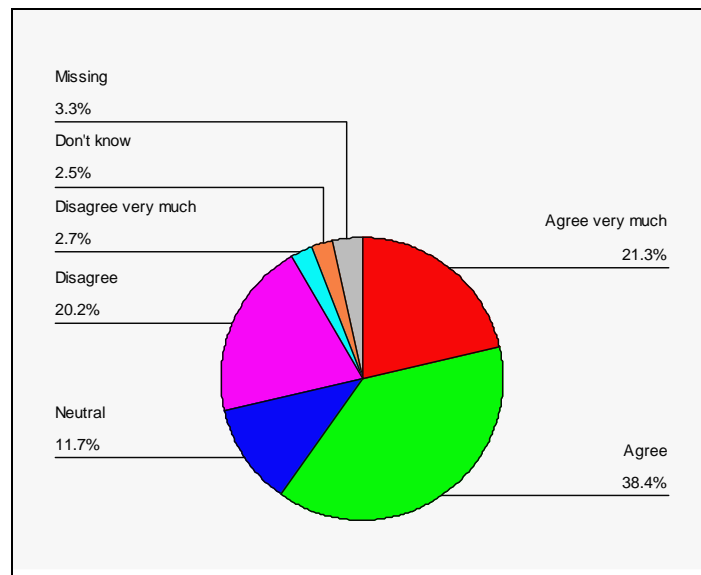
4. The need that was identified as the forth highest percentage was "assistance with developing priorities and strategies for meeting the identified needs of children with disabilities."

Agree very much	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Disagree very Much	Don't know	Missing
n = 78 21%	n = 141 38%	n = 43 12%	n = 74 20%	n = 10 3%	n = 9 3%	n = 12 3%

*Percentages have been rounded

Issues around developing priorities and strategies are reported in the comments made by respondents. They included:

- *"Our SEAC needs more strategies for implementing action, instead of just discussing issues as much as we do."*
- *"I serve on a committee - very laid back committee. A plan is usually given to us, we are not asked to advise in its development. We are asked to approve it or ask questions. When concerns are brought up- they are usually addressed well- but this committee is not promoted as a sounding board for needs or gaps in services and it could be used for this more often I would think."*
- *"My only frustration is that we spend so much time and energy reacting to new state and federal mandates (most of which address real needs, but generally without supplementing our resources) that we have little opportunity to be proactive in addressing what needs we perceive."*



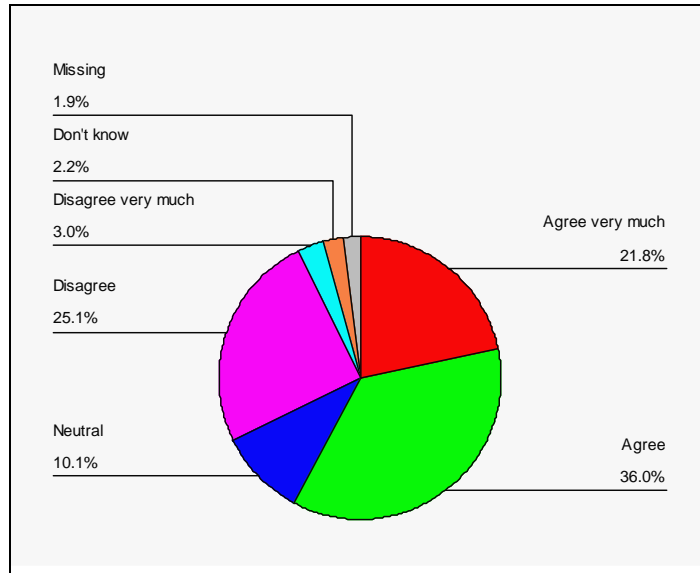
5. The need that was identified as the fifth highest percentage was “assistance with identifying unmet needs in the education of children with disabilities.”

Agree very much	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Disagree very Much	Don't know	Missing
n = 80 22%	n = 132 36%	n = 37 10%	n = 92 25%	n = 11 3%	n = 8 2%	n = 7 2%

*Percentages have been rounded

Issues around identifying unmet needs in the education of children with disabilities are reported in the comment made by the following respondent:

- Two areas of concern: helping to keep parents/community informed of the needs and assuring that the committee works with the special education staff to identify unmet needs.



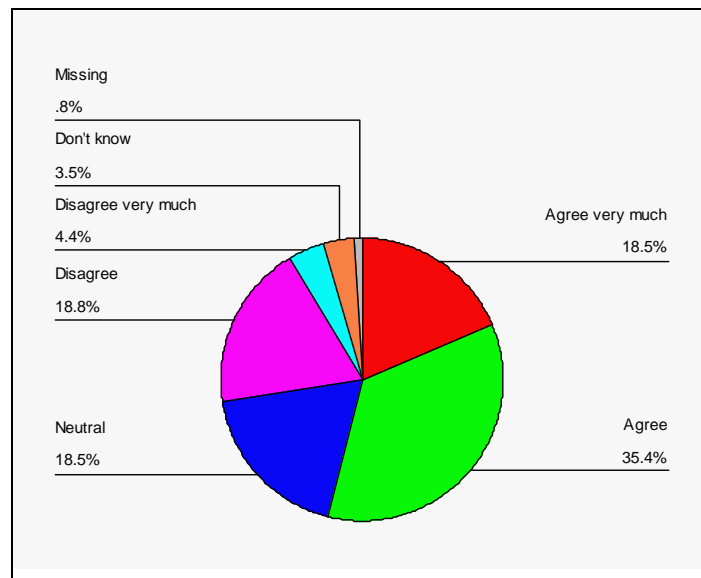
6. The need that was identified the sixth highest percentage was "assistance with clarifying and understanding the Virginia Regulations regarding SEACs."

Agree very much	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Disagree very Much	Don't know	Missing
n = 68 19%	n = 130 35%	n = 68 19%	n = 69 19%	n = 16 4%	n = 13 3%	n = 3 1%

*Percentages have been rounded

Issues around clarifying and understanding Virginia Regulations regarding SEACs are reported in the comment made by the following respondents:

- *"Any assistance that may improve our performance for the children with special needs (meeting their needs) will be greatly appreciated. Especially interpreting some of the laws and by-laws associated with special education and VA Department of Education practices."*
- *"SEACs have great potential when the membership has an understanding of their responsibilities as committee members and of the laws and regulations that govern special education. Often the groundwork is not laid and the members do not have this basic understanding; therefore the committee lacks effectiveness."*



Conclusions

Overall participants expressed confidence that their local SEACs are accomplishing most of the responsibilities outlined in the Virginia Regulations. Specifically, 83 percent of respondents indicated that their SEACs are advising the local school division of unmet needs in the education of children with disabilities. However, comments indicated that some respondents feel that SEACs have limited success in working collaboratively with school administrations and school boards in improving special education services.

Although the majority of participants reported that their local SEACs were fulfilling expectations, many other respondents either disagreed or did not know if these activities were occurring. Many of the six responsibilities listed yielded percentages much less than 100 percent. This suggests that some local SEACs may need assistance with accomplishing responsibilities as outlined in the Virginia Regulations.

The greatest percentage of respondents identified the need for assistance with obtaining or maintaining active parental involvement (77%). Numerous comments supported this need. Five other areas of possible need were specified by agreement from more than 50 percent of respondents. These include assistance with formulating and developing plans, assistance with interpreting plans to the community, assistance with developing priorities and strategies, assistance with identifying unmet needs, and assistance with clarifying and understanding the Virginia Regulations regarding SEACs.

Of the remaining areas where local SEACs might need assistance, all received an agreement rating of less than 50 percent from respondents. Although low percentages of participants identified the need for assistance with consensus building (33 percent) and team building (40 percent), comments support a need for increased skills in working collaboratively with school administrations and school boards. Respondents may not view these skills as necessary in carrying out SEAC responsibilities. However, project staff members observe that these areas represent the foundations of effective committee functioning, both from the standpoint of content (understanding laws and regulations and reviewing policies and procedures) and process (operating with by-law, and using collaborative teaming skills, including developing consensus).

This Needs Assessment clarifies SEAC and school division needs for assistance in: ensuring effective parental involvement; learning about and carrying out the responsibilities of SEACs as outlined in the Virginia Regulations; and building proficiency in working effectively and collaboratively as a committee and with local school division representatives in addressing the unmet needs of students receiving special education services.



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Partnership for People with Disabilities, Virginia Commonwealth University, April 2005