

Dear Trustees of the Board of Education,

The Ann Arbor Parent Advisory Committee (AAPAC) for Students with Disabilities submits this report for your Wednesday, February 24, 2021 meeting.

We do not intend this report as a comment on all of the policies discussed at, or the results of, your last meeting on February 17, 2021. We represent the families of over 2,500 AAPS students with disabilities, therefore our perspectives on the range of challenges AAPS faces are as varied as the overall population of parents and students in all of AAPS.

Instead, our comments here focus on the immediate need for a solid plan, *communicated in detail to parents*, to get students with disabilities back into buildings as soon as possible. These students' learning is the most impacted by the 100% virtual environment.

It is our understanding that SISS staff have been offered the opportunity for COVID vaccinations. We sincerely appreciate Dr. Swift and her team for working with the health department to make it happen. Ms. Linden and Dr. Fidishin have assured us in our monthly meetings that staff have been working hard to plan for returning the most-impacted students to buildings. It is time for a concrete plan.

Students with disabilities in AAPS have been affected by 100% virtual instruction and locked-down buildings in the following ways. We ask that the AAPS use this, as well as its own knowledge of students' needs, to prioritize the return to in-person learning:

- 1) **Some students have received no education from AAPS since 3/13/20.** Whether because of sensory needs, intellectual disability, lack of motor skills, memory issues, or a myriad of other disability-related reasons, some students simply cannot participate in school when interactions are 100% on screen. These students are truly unable to learn without in-person interaction; for example, a student who needs hand-over-hand instruction in order to write letters, or count and understand the concept of one-to-one correspondence. For these students, it will not matter what methods of virtual instruction is used or what technology is acquired by the district. They require an in-person setting. While AAPAC certainly understands the need for safety and does not take health concerns lightly, it must also be recognized that these most-impacted students have had no real educational services provided to them since March 13, 2020.
- 2) **Uneven/inequitable service provision.** Inequitable education services have played out in two ways for students with disabilities. These are: 1) less time offered than for typical peers and 2) not being offered the full range of available services to meet the student's needs. First, many students with disabilities are being offered less instructional time than non-disabled peers – currently during an elementary school day, a typical 2nd grader has approximately 4 hours of direct instructional time with a classroom teacher, specials teacher, or other adult facilitated group work. Students with more significant disabilities, who likely require additional time to learn concepts, are actually offered far less due to the fact of 100% virtual instruction. From our conversations with staff we believe that most of these reduced-service offerings are because it would be inappropriate to ask certain students with disabilities to sit at the computer for longer periods of time. We

agree that this would be inappropriate. *We are not asking for more time on Zoom, we are asking to add in-person hours.* Regarding specific SISS service time, some students are simply being offered less in amount, or less appropriate services (e.g., group work when individual is appropriate) than similarly situated students with disabilities. Of course, inequitable service provision was an issue in the AAPS pre-pandemic, but the inequity has been exacerbated by the virtual environment and parents' inability to know what services are provided for other students in their building or in other AAPS buildings.

- 3) **Exclusion from community—S/E instruction and opportunities.** It is widely recognized by educators, parents, and also thankfully by the AAPS that social-emotional health and connections are a significant part of a preK-12 education. Many students have been able to maintain connections with school friends during the pandemic because they do breakout zoom rooms together for snack breaks, play chess or watch YouTube videos together during lunch, and can work on group projects as organized by their teacher. Unfortunately for many students with disabilities these connections are completely impossible in a virtual setting. A child's disability may manifest in difficulties with social/emotional connections, a student may have vision or cognitive impairments that mean that they recognize friends by the way they walk or the way they smell, or perhaps the child is nonverbal and lacks motor coordination to make themselves noticed on a tiny Zoom window. These children likely feel zero connection with anyone on a computer screen. Given these difficulties, the opportunity to safely share physical space with some teachers and some peers is so critical to these learners. The importance of this connection cannot be overstated.
- 4) **Exclusion from community—School related community activities.** With respect to community activities, with school buildings closed, there is literally no place safe for some of our students with a disability besides home. We know that AAPS neighborhood partners like Peace Neighborhood Center and others have provided an invaluable service in hosting at-risk students during school instruction time, and that other families have utilized pods of neighbors with one teacher, child care center learning labs, etc. But none of these solutions have the structured environment, enough staff, or pedagogical expertise to teach at-risk students with disabilities, including our most complex students. Many of these students need a very structured behavior plan, have sensory needs, require toileting assistance, and have significant learning challenges. These are but a few of the requirements found among students with disabilities. Public school is the one place that our students can count on to accept, include, and teach them. AAPS schools are equipped for these students. Staff are trained. Transportation is available. Many students with disabilities are literally isolated from social interactions outside of their households. We have lost the community that our students once belonged to, and there are no alternatives.
- 5) **Being cut off from the physical resources required to provide appropriate instruction.** AAPS teachers have been allowed into buildings only two times since March 13, 2020, and for very limited time frames. Many children require physical manipulative materials to learn because of the impact of their disability on cognitive processing. We know that most children learn *better* with a variety of materials, but in

this case, we are talking about students who *cannot* learn without physical and tactile experiences. These materials exist in our schools, but have not been made easily accessible to students and their families.

We now ask that you, Trustees of the Board of Education, provide specific direction to guide Dr. Swift and the administration in order to solve the educational crisis that students with disabilities are experiencing. There are creative, brilliant minds among the staff of SISS, building principals, and other roles in AAPS responsible for educating our complex learners. If you are clear in your direction and expectations, staff will rise to the occasion.

We further ask that the Board of Education direct to Dr. Swift and her team to do the following:

- ⇒ Immediately set a date for return to in-person learning for students with IEPs and 504s who cannot receive an appropriate education virtually. AAPS has been planning since mid-January and the March 22 date discussed on 2/17/21 is 3 weeks later than previously expected. A return to buildings, in some format, is possible before then.
- ⇒ Provide or direct a transparent decision-making process to prioritize student invitations for in-person learning
- ⇒ Direct that all in-person teachers utilize sound field equipment already installed in each classroom to help mitigate the effect of mask-wearing for students with attention difficulties, those deaf and hard of hearing, and others with auditory processing difficulties
- ⇒ Direct that staff who have completed necessary COVID-safe procedures training have access to their classrooms and materials necessary to support appropriate education for students with IEPs and 504s, whether those students return to in-person learning or choose to stay virtual
- ⇒ Set specific goals for communication with families, such as:
 - Classroom teachers and/or case managers must contact families of students in self-contained classrooms before March 1 to solicit concerns, health updates, and gather input
 - Communication must come directly from buildings with detailed plans regarding the physical needs for students with disabilities who would be returning first, such as:
 - COVID-safe spaces for sensory breaks
 - Policies and procedures for protecting students and staff when a student cannot tolerate a mask
 - Policies and procedures for meeting students' physical needs when a 6 foot distance cannot be maintained
 - Staff/student/parent training opportunities to ensure fidelity to the above policies and procedures
 - Access to building resources (learning materials, large spaces for motor breaks, etc.)
 - Information on specialized PPE to facilitate communication

⇒ Acknowledge that additional resources must be allocated to recovery services through the summer and at least 2021-22.

Too many students with disabilities have lost an entire year of school. This is not hyperbole. The impacts of virtual instruction for some students with disabilities go far beyond the impacts we all feel from the coronavirus pandemic. Thus far, these impacts have been ignored.

Thank you in advance for taking concrete steps to mitigate the ongoing consequences for our highest-needs students.

Sincerely,

The 2020-21 AAPAC Board

Melissa Epstein, Co-Chair, AAPAC, 2020-21; Haisley Elementary parent

Kate Wright, Co-Chair, AAPAC, 2020-21; Bryant Elementary parent