



**South Carolina Advisory Council
For Educating Students with Disabilities
Annual Report 2025-2026**

Dear Superintendent Ellen Weaver and the South Carolina State Board of Education,

On behalf of the South Carolina Advisory Council for Educating Students with Disabilities (Advisory Council), I am pleased to submit this report summarizing the Advisory Council's activities and accomplishments from July 1, 2025 – June 30, 2026.

The past year has been another exceptional opportunity for collaboration between the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE), Office of Special Education Services (OSES) and the Advisory Council. Membership of the Advisory Council includes parents of students with disabilities, individuals with disabilities, K–12 general and special educators, school district administrators, advocates, representatives of nonprofit organizations, representatives of higher education, and governmental service providers from throughout the state.

The majority of the work of the Advisory Council is done by five committees: Executive, Preschool, Professional Development, Safe Schools and Mental Health, and Transition and Self-Advocacy. Every Advisory Council member participates in at least one committee.

The full Advisory Council meets four times a year and is open to the public. We encourage anyone with an interest in special education to attend and present their concerns and suggestions for improving opportunities for students with disabilities.

The Advisory Council appreciates the support, information, and guidance provided by the SCDE OSES as we strive together to make a free and appropriate public education a reality for all students in South Carolina. A special note of thanks goes to the following people for their continuous commitment to the operation of the Advisory Council: Peter Keup, Director of the OSES, and Cheryl Fitts, OSES Advisory Council Liaison.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Susan Kreh Beck", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Ms. Susan Kreh Beck, Chair
South Carolina Advisory Council for Educating Students with Disabilities

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SC Advisory Council for Educating Students with Disabilities 2025-2026 Annual Report

I. Advisory Council Mandate

In accordance with Section 300.167–300.169 of the final regulations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA '04) each state is required to establish and maintain an advisory council for the purpose of providing guidance with respect to special education and related services for students with disabilities. The South Carolina Advisory Council for Educating Students with Disabilities (Advisory Council) works in collaboration with the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE) Office of Special Education Services (OSSES).

II. Vision

The Advisory Council envisions a world where all students are respected and challenged, where the needs of all students are met, and where the aspirations for success of all students are fulfilled.

III. Mission

The Advisory Council's mission is to make recommendations that impact decisions made on behalf of students with disabilities to enhance the quality of educational services they receive and to enable them to reach their individual potential.

IV. Advisory Council Membership

The members are selected on the basis of their knowledge of, or experience in, the education of students with disabilities. Members are broadly representative of South Carolina's population regarding developmental, physical and mental disabilities, race, ethnic background, gender, and geographic location. Representation of the Advisory Council is established by statute to include parents of students with disabilities, individuals with disabilities, K-12 general and special educators, school district administrators, advocates, representatives of higher education, and governmental service providers. The majority of members must be parents and/or individuals with disabilities.

A formal application process is used by the Advisory Council Executive Committee to provide recommendations for appointment by the Superintendent of Education. New members are appointed in July of each year and serve for a three-year period.

V. Public Participation

All Advisory Council meetings and agenda items are announced in advance of each meeting to afford interested parties a reasonable opportunity to attend. A public comment period is provided at each meeting. The Advisory Council takes all testimony under advisement and forwards comments to committees, agencies, or departments as appropriate.

VI. Public Comments

Opportunities for public input into the activities of the Advisory Council are important. Individuals, groups, or organizations may address the Advisory Council in the following ways:

- In person: During the Public Comment period outlined in the agenda the person providing public comment may join the virtual platform to issue their public comment or appear in person in the case of in-person meetings.
- In writing: Public comment may be submitted electronically or through the US Mail addressed to the Advisory Council liaison at the OSES or the Chairperson of the Advisory Council.

During the 2025-2026 year, the Advisory Council received zero requests for public comment at the four public meetings. The call for public comment is posted on the Council website and circulated with the agenda sent to members. This agenda is also typically reforwarded by members to interested and involved advocates and parents as well as other educational contacts.

VII. Committees

The **Executive Committee** directs the business of the Advisory Council to include developing meeting agendas, overseeing the nomination process, setting the calendar, reviewing the by-laws and policies, and developing the annual report. This committee also represents the Advisory Council in a variety of state-level activities.

The **Preschool Committee** works to improve the identification of preschool age children with special needs, improve access to inclusive practices and programs, and help ensure the prompt delivery of services.

The **Professional Development Committee** collaborates with the SCDE and South Carolina higher education institutions to improve and expand the delivery of information regarding special education issues, legal issues, and best practices to all teachers, administrators, and general public.

The **Safe Schools and Mental Health Committee** collaborates with state and local agencies that provide services to students, families, and schools in the area of mental health, bullying prevention, and seclusion/restraints.

The **Transition and Self Advocacy Committee** works to research and identify the unmet transition services needs of students with disabilities and to disseminate information about successful transition programs and services.

VIII. Communications of the Council

To encourage the participation of all members in the Advisory Council's activities, and to keep the public informed and involved in identifying the unmet needs of students with disabilities, a variety of means of communicating and disseminating information is used.

- The Advisory Council utilized conference calls and e-mails to conduct business, review information, receive updates from the OSES, and expedite decision-making.
- The Advisory Council worked with OSES to maintain a Council library to house important documents and presentations.
- The Advisory Council worked to keep the web page current at the SCDE, OSES's website, to increase the presence of the Council.
- The Advisory Council prepared the Annual Report for submission to the Superintendent of Education to formally inform the SCDE of the unmet needs of students with disabilities and to make recommendations for addressing those needs.
- The Advisory Council maintained minutes of each meeting of the Advisory Council and its committees. The minutes are available to the public online and upon request.

IX. Activities and Accomplishments

During the period covered by this report, Advisory Council members participated in the activities noted below.

General Activities of the Council

- Conducted four full Council meetings to carry out the work of the Council. Three meetings were held virtually and one meeting was held in-person in West Columbia, South Carolina.
- Received information from the OSES concerning the State Performance Plan (SPP), the Annual Performance Report (APR), the State Systemic Improvement Plan (SSIP), and a report from the SCDE Office of General Counsel regarding the legislative session and provided comments.

Executive Committee

The Executive Committee conducted four executive meetings to set the calendar / agenda, made recommendations for membership, reviewed bylaws, and performed oversight of the activities of the Advisory Council.

Preschool Committee

During the 2025–2026 reporting period, the Preschool Committee welcomed both new and returning members and reviewed the committee's purpose, structure, and ongoing priorities. Members shared updates regarding statewide early childhood initiatives and activities occurring across partner agencies and organizations, highlighting the importance of collaboration across South Carolina's mixed-delivery early childhood system.

Key updates included planning for the South Carolina Early Childhood Inclusion Conference, findings from the Untapped Potential Report on Child Care, staffing and service delivery initiatives within SC BabyNet, early intervention collaborations with pediatric providers, the South Carolina School for the Deaf and the Blind's Visual Language

Services program, and current initiatives led by the South Carolina Department of Mental Health.

Following a review of previous recommendations and the committee's vision statement, members established three priority areas for the year: (1) developing an Early Childhood Inclusion State Leadership Team (SLT); (2) promoting the use of common language across early childhood systems; and (3) supporting the Early Transitions Initiative to strengthen transitions from Part C Early Intervention to Part B Section 619 Preschool Special Education Services.

To guide the committee's work, three SMART goals were adopted. The first focused on establishing a statewide Early Childhood Inclusion State Leadership Team composed of representatives from education, early intervention, child care, higher education, and family advocacy organizations. The committee worked extensively throughout the year to establish the SLT by reviewing the State Leadership Team Benchmarks of Quality, developing membership criteria, establishing operating procedures and meeting norms, and creating a shared vision and mission. The Preschool Committee was designated as the core membership of the SLT, with additional stakeholders invited as needed to support specific initiatives.

The second goal centered on developing a Common Language Document to promote consistency and shared understanding across agencies and programs. Committee members reviewed, revised, and ultimately approved the document for dissemination statewide. The committee also developed supporting materials and strategies to promote effective implementation and use of the resource throughout the early childhood community.

The third goal focused on supporting the Early Transitions Initiative and improving coordination between Part C and Part B preschool services. Committee members reviewed transition-related resources, provided feedback to strengthen transition practices, and continued collaboration with partner organizations to improve alignment and communication across systems.

Throughout the year, members shared organizational updates that informed committee discussions, including revisions to the BabyNet Policy Manual, development of an Orientation and Mobility Program at USC Upstate, and changes to Head Start eligibility requirements.

Based on its work, the Preschool Committee recommends that the Department clearly communicates expectations regarding inclusive practices and emphasize the critical role of inclusion in promoting positive educational outcomes for young children with disabilities. The committee further recommends that the Department examine state policies and procedures that may inadvertently create barriers to inclusion, including the Child Development Education Pilot Program guidelines and eligibility-related regulations.

Finally, the Preschool Committee strongly supports continued cross-sector collaboration and intentional partnerships among general education, special education, early intervention, child care, and community agencies. The committee believes that initiatives

such as Early Transitions and the Foundations for Success Task Force are essential for improving outcomes for young children with disabilities and their families and ensuring access to high-quality, coordinated early childhood services throughout South Carolina.

Professional Development Committee

During the reporting period, the Professional Development Committee focused on issues related to educational outcomes, inclusive practices, family engagement, systems advocacy, and professional learning to improve services for students with disabilities. The committee's work centered primarily on Indicators 3 (assessment participation and performance) and 5 (Least Restrictive Environment), while also exploring broader systemic issues affecting students and families.

At the beginning of the reporting period, committee leadership reviewed the committee's charge related to Indicators 3 and 5. Members reviewed available state and district-level data and discussed the State Performance Plan/Annual Performance Report (SPP/APR) as a means of understanding statewide trends and identifying areas for future committee work. Committee members were encouraged to review district and statewide data in preparation for ongoing discussions.

The committee engaged in extensive discussions regarding long-term goals and identified Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) as a primary area of focus. Members discussed concerns regarding the number of students with disabilities educated in alternative placements, including homebound settings and institutions, and expressed interest in exploring innovative models from neighboring states designed to increase access to inclusive educational opportunities. The committee also identified the need for increased professional development related to behavior support, instructional practices, and supports designed to ensure students receive a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE).

The committee collaborated with the Transition Committee to explore opportunities to increase awareness and understanding of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). Representatives from both committees agreed to work together to identify strategies for improving stakeholder knowledge and supporting successful postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities.

A significant portion of committee work focused on family engagement and systems-level advocacy through the development of recommendations regarding Local Advisory Councils for school districts. Members reviewed and revised a draft guidance letter addressing topics such as parent representation requirements, the use of neutral facilitators, bylaw development, accountability measures, and implementation considerations for districts of varying sizes. Committee representatives also collaborated with legislative stakeholders by providing feedback on proposed legislation related to local advisory councils. Following revisions, the committee approved the draft letter for submission to the Executive Committee.

Additional discussions centered on the implementation and sustainability of 24-hour IEP programs. Members emphasized that comprehensive educational programming can serve

as a preventative measure to reduce hospitalization, incarceration, and institutionalization for students with intensive needs. The committee discussed challenges associated with fragmented funding systems, workforce shortages, Medicaid and billing requirements, and the need for increased advocacy related to professional and related service providers. Members also highlighted the importance of cross-agency collaboration, coordinated community partnerships, and parent training to support continuity of care across home, school, and community settings.

Throughout the reporting period, the committee identified several areas for continued exploration, including inclusive educational practices, Indicator 5 data trends, supports for increasing LRE opportunities, the development of recommendations related to 24-hour IEP programming, and strategies to strengthen family engagement and stakeholder collaboration. The committee will continue to examine these issues and develop recommendations designed to improve educational outcomes and inclusive opportunities for students with disabilities across South Carolina.

Safe Schools Committee

During the 2025–2026 reporting period, the Safe Schools Committee focused on issues related to school discipline, safe and supportive learning environments, disproportionality, legislative initiatives, and the educational experiences of vulnerable student populations, including students with disabilities in foster care and early childhood settings. Throughout the year, the committee reviewed and monitored state and federal data related to IDEA Indicators 4A and 4B, which address significant discrepancies in suspension and expulsion rates and disproportionality in disciplinary actions by race and ethnicity. The committee also reviewed Indicator 8 (parent involvement), Indicator 9 (disproportionate representation in special education), and Indicator 10 (disproportionate representation within specific disability categories). Data trends from 2020 through 2024 demonstrated improvements in several areas, including decreases in significant disciplinary discrepancies, reductions in disproportionality related to race and ethnicity, and increases in parent involvement.

Committee members engaged in ongoing discussions regarding school discipline practices, suspension and expulsion trends, and related legislative activity. Particular attention was given to suspension rates among students with disabilities, with members noting that South Carolina continues to experience high rates of exclusionary discipline for this population. The committee discussed the educational and family impact of missed instructional time and emphasized the importance of providing students with access to high-quality learning experiences and supportive behavioral interventions.

The committee also examined concerns related to preschool suspension and expulsion practices. Members reviewed research and statewide data demonstrating the long-term impact of exclusionary discipline on young children and families. Discussions highlighted the importance of increasing educator understanding of typical early childhood development and behavior, strengthening behavioral supports in early childhood settings, and reducing the use of suspension and expulsion practices among young children.

Safe transportation practices and student health and safety were also monitored. Committee members discussed proposed legislation related to school bus safety, including issues surrounding medical information sharing and the provision of transportation aides for students with disabilities.

Throughout the year, the committee closely monitored federal and state legislative activity affecting students with disabilities, including discussions related to significant disproportionality reporting, educator safety legislation, and broader federal education policy changes. Members remained attentive to potential changes in federal regulations and funding structures and discussed implications for schools, students, and families.

The committee received presentations and updates on several initiatives designed to support students experiencing trauma and adversity. Members reviewed the implementation of the Handle with Care program, a statewide initiative that promotes communication and support for students impacted by traumatic events while protecting student confidentiality and preventing re-traumatization. The committee also discussed school-based, social, and emotional learning supports and interventions designed to strengthen student resilience and well-being.

Recognizing the unique needs of students in foster care, the committee requested and reviewed discipline, suspension, expulsion, and dropout data related to students with disabilities placed in foster care. Members discussed the heightened educational risks experienced by these students and the need for continued monitoring and support to improve educational outcomes.

In addition to student-focused initiatives, the committee discussed educator wellness and the importance of supporting teacher mental health. Members explored opportunities for districts to provide resources, self-assessment tools, and supports designed to address educator stress and promote staff well-being.

Based on its work, the Safe Schools Committee recommends continued monitoring of discipline and disproportionality data, expansion of preventative and trauma-informed practices, increased attention to preschool suspension and expulsion, and ongoing efforts to support both student and educator well-being. The committee remains committed to promoting safe, equitable, and supportive educational environments for all students across South Carolina.

Transition and Self-Advocacy Committee

During the 2025–2026 reporting period, the Transition and Self-Advocacy Committee focused on improving transition planning resources, increasing family awareness of postsecondary options and supports, and strengthening statewide consistency in transition services for students with disabilities and their families.

At the beginning of the year, committee members reviewed the committee's purpose and established processes to support collaboration, including the use of a shared Google Drive platform for document development, resource sharing, and workgroup activities. Members identified a significant need for family-friendly transition resources and discussed

concerns regarding variability in transition services across South Carolina. Committee members emphasized the importance of developing resources that provide families with clear, consistent information regardless of geographic location.

A major accomplishment of the committee was the development, revision, and approval of a statewide Transition Resource Document designed to assist families in understanding transition planning, educational pathways, and the relationship between educational decisions and future outcomes. The committee intentionally focused on creating resources that were accessible, parent-friendly, and easy to understand. Members explored strategies, including the use of artificial intelligence tools, to simplify language and improve readability for families. The committee also emphasized the importance of helping families understand diploma-track decisions early in the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process.

Throughout the year, committee members reviewed and consolidated existing transition resources and ultimately determined that a single comprehensive resource document would best meet the needs of families. The committee developed plans for the final resource to be housed on the South Carolina Department of Education's website to ensure statewide accessibility and public access.

The committee established specialized work groups to support the development of resources related to postsecondary education, independent living, self-advocacy, employment, supported employment, financial aid, and community-based services. Members researched and compiled information regarding South Carolina LIFE programs, Think College initiatives, adult education opportunities, technical college programs, employment pathways, disability resource centers in higher education, Vocational Rehabilitation services, and Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS).

The committee also highlighted emerging post-secondary opportunities for students with disabilities, including new programs offered through Midlands Technical College and Greenville Technical College designed to support students with intellectual and developmental disabilities through independent living and employment preparation experiences.

Recognizing the importance of coordinated statewide efforts, the committee collaborated with the Professional Development Committee to develop educational materials related to the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). This work focused on increasing family understanding of workforce development services, employment supports, and funding opportunities available to students with disabilities. Although the WIOA document was not approved by the Executive Committee during the reporting period, the Transition and Self-Advocacy Committee remains committed to revising and refining the resource for future use.

In addition to resource development, the committee established sustainable structures to support ongoing work, including formal work groups, document review procedures, collaborative resource development processes, and long-range planning activities designed to ensure continued growth and maintenance of transition resources.

The Transition/Self-Advocacy Committee successfully moved from discussion to implementation by creating practical, family-centered resources that support informed decision-making related to diploma pathways, post-secondary education, employment, independent living, self-advocacy, and access to community supports. The committee remains committed to promoting equitable transition planning practices and improving post-school outcomes for students with disabilities across South Carolina.

X. Recommendations

The Advisory Council has several recommendations based on the Council activities completed over the last year:

1. **Strengthen Inclusive Education Systems and Access**
Continue to expand and support inclusive educational practices across all settings, including early childhood, alternative placements, and intensive programming, while ensuring students with disabilities receive a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment.
2. **Improve Policy Alignment and Systemic Barriers to Inclusion**
Examine and revise state policies, procedures, and eligibility guidelines (including early childhood frameworks such as CERDEP) to reduce systemic barriers and increase equitable access to inclusive educational opportunities.
3. **Enhance Cross-Sector Collaboration and Family Engagement**
Sustain and expand collaboration among schools, early intervention, child care, higher education, community agencies, and families, including strengthening Local Advisory Councils and coordinated efforts across Part C, Part B, and community partners.
4. **Expand Prevention, Behavior Supports, and Educator Capacity**
Increase professional development and implementation of evidence-based instructional, behavioral, trauma-informed, and social-emotional supports, while reducing exclusionary discipline and improving educator understanding of development and student needs.
5. **Strengthen Transition Planning, Post-School Outcomes, and Statewide Monitoring**
Enhance transition supports from early childhood through postsecondary outcomes, including access to workforce development, clear transition resources, and consistent monitoring of IDEA indicators and statewide data to inform continuous improvement.

Appendix A

2025 – 2026 Full Council Meeting Calendar South Carolina Advisory Council for Educating Students with Disabilities (ACESD)

August 22, 2025, Zoom

October 24, 2025, In-Person

January 23, 2026, Zoom

March 27, 2026, Zoom

Appendix B

The agenda for each ACESD meeting is shared with each member at least 24 hours prior to the meeting. You may find the agendas by clicking this [link](#) to the ACESD Agenda and Minutes webpage.

Appendix C

The ACESD secretary records minutes during each full Council meeting. Those minutes are reviewed at the beginning of the following meeting, in which any corrections may be made as suggested by the body. The ACESD then votes to approve the minutes or hold for further review. The 2025-2026 full Council meeting minutes are found by clicking the link [here](#) to the ACESD Agenda and Minutes webpage.

Appendix D

ACESD Membership listing 2025-2026 Organized by Committee

Preschool Committee Members

Shana Charles	Wendy Hite
Mary Lynne Diggs	Cathy Kovacs*
Stephanie Donald	Erin Laughter
Scott Falcone/	Susan Luberoff
Senekita Farmer	Tiffany Norwood
Elaine Gentry	Kimberly Outen
Heather Smith Googe	Teresa Rhodes
Leah Green	Lindsay Schmelzel
Melissa Griffin*	
Malerie Hartsell	

Professional Development Committee Members

Allison Adrian	Shannon Polchow
Carly Bowman	Lindsay Porter
Danshelle Guy	Anne Radue*
Allison Huffstutler*	Samica Snipes-Smith
Laurie Lee	Mary Wood
Angie Lucas	Elizabeth Young
Gini Nichols	Adair Yatko*

Safe Schools Committee Members

Susan Beck*	Birley Wright
Valarie Bishop*	Daphne New
Damian Bridges	Sadina Outlaw
Denean Greene Rivers	Bridgette Watson
Deborah Harris-Sims	Amber Woodward
Kimberly Humphrey	

Transition and Self-Advocacy Committee Members

Megan Burns*	Mary Higginbotham
Helen Campbell	Yasmin O'Keefe
Jane Brandis	Holden Roberts
Rebekah Francis-Barnes	Kristen Schmutz
Denise Eubanks	Mary Stevenson
Jeni Garner	Karen Tucker
Troy Hall	Margie Williamson*

*co-chairs

Appendix E

The Preschool Committee of the ACESD is charged with the responsibility of identifying and studying key issues in special education and early intervention, advising, and assisting the SCDE OSES in identifying the unmet needs of preschool children with disabilities. The 2025 Annual Preschool Report and resulting recommendations are pursuant to Act 86 of 1993, Chapter 36 of Title 59 of the Amended Code of Laws of South Carolina, 1976.

[See the full preschool report here.](#)