**ACE\_Announcement**

**Speakers: Daniel Irwin, Staci Carr, Angela Neely**

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>> DANIEL IRWIN: Hi. I'm Daniel Irwin. I'm the autism specialist at the Virginia Department of Education. Today we're announcing the request for applications for division-wide technical assistance for exemplary services to support students with autism spectrum disorders. I'm joined today by Dr. Staci Carr, the coordinator for technical assistance at VCU's Autism Center for Excellence, and Angela Neely, the executive director of special education for Culpeper County.

This year for cohort four, we are looking for applications from school divisions who are really focused on improving services for their students with autism spectrum disorder. We'll be selecting five to seven school divisions through a competitive application process with a comprehensive review into the applications from school divisions. Successful applications will demonstrate a clearly defined strategy for systemic changes across the school division and will outline the school's goals or the school division's goals for their autism services.

The prominence of children with autism spectrum disorder has risen dramatically over the past several years and continues to rise year after year. December 1st count from 2018 indicated that we have 22,700 students in Virginia being served under the category of autism. Due to the spectrum of the disability, we know that students frequently require different levels or higher intensity of services depending on their needs and may require additional structure in their day. School divisions are looking for support in supporting these students and getting them into less restrictive environments and being able to provide the supports for them, and the ACE Grant for Technical Assistance is really designed to meet that need. Since its beginning, VCU ACE has worked with 24 school divisions to really address and home in on school division needs and building supports within those school divisions to serve students with autism.

Divisions that receive the VCU ACE Grant can expect to receive 40 to 50 hours per month of embedded technical assistance from VCU ACE staff. The technical assistance really focuses on a top-down, bottom-up model that follows along five phases. The top-down, bottom-up model really looks at supports being provided at the classroom level to support individual students in classrooms, and the top-down model really looks at providing supports at the administrative level to really make some changes within the division to continue that support down the road.

The first phase of implementation is the exploration phase. This phase runs from about March to June of 2020 where the VCU ACE technical assistance staff and the school team will identify infrastructure that's in place to support students, assess current practices, and develop commitment and buy-in and really find those partners within the division.

In the second phase, which would begin fall of 2020, with the VCU ACE support establishing leadership teams and looking at how to move forward with the grant, developing data systems and identifying how to measure progress through the team's plan, and divining a vision, mission, beliefs, and goals to really guide the work over the next three years and beyond in supporting students with autism.

In phase three, initial implementation, the VCU ACE staff will be very focused on supporting implementation, continuing that ongoing assessment in classrooms and school-wide and division-wide, and really expanding the knowledge base of a variety of stakeholders across the school division.

In phase four, really looking to embed those practices into standard practices, identifying and addressing barriers that may continue to be barriers to implementation, and really start looking at a sustainability plan.

And in phase five, the team comes together, sort of looks at the plan again, revises it thinking forward when the VCU ACE technical assistance is no longer in the division, and looking at how the division can support sustainable change.

We know what works with kids with autism. The focus of the technical assistance provided by VCU ACE is really supporting the implementation of evidence-based practices across the board. And so some of the resources we use are the autism documentation from the Virginia Department of Education, but really focusing in on the evidence-based practices that have been identified by the National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorders. These are the core of what we try to get embedded into classrooms because we know they're effective not only for students with autism but also for students across the board.

To be eligible to participate in cohort four, you must be a public school division. This isn't a grant that just goes to individual classrooms. This is a division-wide effort. Participants may not be previous participants or recipients of the grant. If you were in cohort one, two, or three, you are not eligible. Sorry. We look for teams that are engaged in making meaningful change and teams that have a commitment to continue to engage in that change and meaningful planning. Single school divisions can apply or regional programs can apply; however, if you are a regional program and you apply, the technical assistance will apply to you only and not the divisions that are sending kids to your program.

>> STACI CARR: Now we'll talk a little bit about what technical assistance services are provided during the time that a division is selected and through their time with VCU ACE.

We provide an array of services based on the specific needs of the division, and we look at developing specific goals, almost like an IEP for the school division. We work as a collaborative team with school division leaders, teachers, administrators, really looking, as Daniel said, to home in on the areas of need, focusing on those evidence-based practices, and really looking to do a division-wide system change. Through that, we have a lot of professional development opportunities, and they look very different from division to division based on the specific needs. We offer coaching, and that is a cornerstone of a lot of the progress and success that we see. We provide mentoring and we look at really that services improvement model.

We start with assessment from the time that the division is selected, and it's really to look at core areas of need across the division, but also what teachers and staff are considering what their strengths are and what they really are looking for to improve their professional development. That really helps in developing the goals that we set forth to work on during the first year and subsequent years. We provide facilitation of the division-wide autism services team, or the ASET, and that really starts by shaping how that planning looks and how we work as a team. But then as the years progress, that team then takes over ownership of the ASET and they begin to run those meetings themselves. We develop the SIP or the ASIP, and that's the Autism Services Improvement Plan. And as Daniel said, this is really looking at students with autism, but all the practices that we provide are really to hone skills and make skills available for teachers and administrators to benefit all students in the division. We facilitate that professional learning community, and that can look as an online opportunity or in division faculty meetings or what have you, to really look at getting people together focused on specific areas of need. It might be transportation, it could be related service providers, but really looking to make sure that the consistency is across the division. And, again, we use that data-based decision-making as we go from the beginning throughout the three years that we are embedded.

We are really looking to have a dedicated division project coordinator, and that person should be available the 40 to 50 hours that we are in the school division. This person can work as the liaison to the rest of the school division and really lead the efforts of the ASET team and ASIP. There is an ASIP team that has about 10 to 20 participants, and that's more of an advisory group that really looks at what the progress has been, offers some input and so forth. But the core ASET team of three to eight participants really does the bulk of the work and works together on a monthly basis or bimonthly to improve on the goals that are developed.

What can you expect if you're selected as one of our divisions? The special education director and leadership team meets with the ACE staff at least two times yearly. We really feel that when the special education director is involved, we see increased improvement and sustainability across the division. We will have regular ASET meetings that are monthly and that's to review the goals, look at activities, and what the progress has been thus far. There is the Communities of Leaders in Autism, or COLA, and those meetings happen twice a year and there's also the summer institute. At least two people from the selected divisions must be participants of those COLA meetings. In addition, during the summer institute, the selected divisions are asked to present either an information sharing opportunity through speed share or a specific track. If there is something that's going on in the school division that's going really well, we really want to get that information to other stakeholders across the COLA. We also ask that you link the VCU ACE website to your division website so that everyone has access to the materials that we provide.

Now I'd like to take some time to talk to Angie Neely from Culpeper. Angie has been a phenomenal resource and advocate for her division and through the ACE grant. We really wanted to get her input as to some of her feedback over her past three years.

Angie, why did you apply for the ACE grant?

>> ANGELA NEELY: Well, as is the case in all school divisions, we had seen a significant increase in the number of students with autism and in the intensity and complexity of their needs. And for the past 10 or 15 years, we had worked hard to develop quality programs for students with autism in the alternate assessment programs, but we were really struggling with our students in the general curriculum. Our indicators indicated that struggle. We just weren't meeting the state targets for graduation rate, least restrictive environment, SOL performance, and suspension rate, so we were really looking for some assistance and support to help us with our students with autism in the general curriculum.

>> STACI CARR: That's fantastic. Angie, what has your experience been with the ACE grant over the past three years?

>> ANGELA NEELY: It's been a fabulous experience. When you apply for something like this, you really don't know what you're getting into. You're not quite sure what to expect even though the expectations are clearly laid out. But it's been a really powerful experience. It has resulted in a lot of growth, I think, for students, for teachers, for our leadership team. It has built capacity in our division. We have just learned so much. We are starting to move the needle on those important indicators. Students are spending more time in the general curriculum. They're being successful there. We are seeing students graduating with standard diplomas. Our LRE data is looking much better. Special education is all about individual students, and some of our toughest students who were not able to maintain in the general classroom are in the general classroom. They are being successful. Our teachers are excited about the professional development. We've come a long way. We still have a long way to go. But the leadership and the guidance that Carol and Noelle have provided for us has really increased the capacity of our core team so that we are going to be able to sustain the growth that we've experienced the last three years and move it forward.

>> STACI CARR: That's great. Angie, what has your involvement been through the ACE grant?

>> ANGELA NEELY: I've been very involved in the ACE grant. I attend every leadership meeting that we have twice a month. I haven't been involved in all of the goal implementation. But one of the goals has been especially important to me and so I have taken the lead on that. It's really been a lot about shared leadership with my team and my central office colleagues. But my involvement has been pretty important, I believe, to the success of the program. It's just been a really valuable experience for me. It's probably been one of the highlights professionally of my career as being a special education director. It's been amazing.

>> STACI CARR: Angie, thank you so much. That was really helpful information. We obviously are very happy that you were part of the ACE cohort three.

>> ANGELA NEELY: Thank you.

>> DANIEL IRWIN: As you heard, Culpeper had their goals aligned for them based on where they saw their division going and the needs in their division, but there are some general expected outcomes that divisions should expect from their involvement with VCU ACE. The first is increase in technical skills and the knowledge of staff across the board. The other is improvement of quality instructional practices, going back to those evidence-based practices and making sure that they're implemented with fidelity and the teachers' knowledge of those skills are increased. The increase in ability of child study teams to identify students with ASD. We know early identification is a good predictor of later success, and so making sure teams are capable and ready to identify kids when needed. And increase the knowledge and provision of positive behavior supports across the board, really looking at how to support kids before there are problem behaviors. You can also expect an increase in the quality of IEPs and the alignment of goals and services as well as accommodations and what programs look like for students with autism. Increase in the ability of general education staff to support students and implementing accommodations and modifications. We are seeing more students with autism participating in less restrictive environments, and so the ability of general education teachers to implement some of these practices is critical in the success of students. Increase knowledge of stakeholders regarding assistive technology and looking at how students are communicating or using assistive technology to enhance their executive functioning skills and really how that can be embedded across the school day. Looking at parent and school partnerships. I believe part of the application is looking at having parent support to really hone in and make sure that parents are in the loop and supporting the project. And an increase in knowledge of transition planning intervention and social skills instruction and really looking at those skills students are going to need after they leave school.

The submission process is a timeline that begins October 15th when the application for the grant will be available. The application will be due December 16th at 5:00 pm sharp. Don't be late. Site visits are part of the application process this year, and we did those last year as well, so looking at the finalists based on their application and paying a visit to the sites to meet with leadership, to see some classrooms, and really kind of get a feel for the division, and then interviewing selected stakeholders. That should be completed by Valentine's Day 2020. Divisions who are selected will know by February 18th, and phase one will begin in March, that assessment phase will begin in March. And then teams that are selected are expected to participate in the Autism Excellence Academy which will occur prior to the summer COLA in Richmond.

If you're interested in submitting an application, please remember that it should be a 25-page maximum, double-spaced, with one-inch margins on all pages, and 12-point font. Your application can be emailed to Carol Schall at cmschall@vcu.edu or to Staci Carr at secarr@vcu.edu. You also have the option to mail it to Melissa Yopp and the address below.

When we consider applications for selection, the first thing we look for is completeness of the application. Please make sure that you've completed all the required pieces before submitting it. We also look at the potential to benefit from technical assistance. As good practitioners, we know that practices can always be improved, but really looking at division-wide where are the needs and the division being able to kind of identify where those needs are. We also want to see that demonstrated commitment to change. This isn't sort of a one and done. We're going to come in and talk to you for a little while and then hope for the best. VCU ACE commits a lot of time and resources to supporting the division, so we really want to see divisions that are looking for that long-term sustainable change. We really want to see the divisions where they are, where they have identified the strengths and where they've been putting the work in, and their vision for what the system change might be or what it might look like or where they see their division going. We're looking for a good explanation of a plan to implement division-wide professional development. While ACE is there to support all of these efforts, we really want the team to identify within their structures and within kind of their staff where the needs are and what that might look like across the year or across three years. We're also looking for an explanation of current initiatives taking place within the division. This is something we really want to make sure is a thorough piece of the application, so that if the division is selected, we can know what supports are already in place and how we can supplement those and work alongside with and embed within those a little bit so we're not sort of a separate thing that's happening in the division. We really want to work what's already working in the division. And then we're looking for letters of commitment from designed stakeholders. This might include community members, school principals, the superintendent of the division, among others which are outlined in the application.

Your application will look like a cover sheet, which is required, and then providing some background information on the school division. We're really looking for folks to kind of take a little bit of a data dive into what the division looks like demographically, disability-wise, and whatever else may be appropriate for the application. We are looking for those existing services and number of students with ASD by grade level and placement. We're looking for not only kind of what grade they're in but what percentage of the day in those buckets of less than 40% in general education, more than 80% in general education, really trying to look at where students are being placed. We're looking for divisions to identify their challenges and their unmet training needs. This is going to be specific division to division. And then really identifying the why, why they're seeking the technical assistance from VCU ACE and some preliminary goals – I can't say that word – preliminary goals that they have identified for themselves. We're also looking for those division resources and processes to support the autism services improvement goals, so what does your infrastructure look like, what sort of supports are already there that can really help support the team and support meeting those goals, any past and present division initiatives that are in place, and those letters of commitment.

Access will be available through this site. It will also be sent out via soups memo October 18th. And there you have it. If you have questions, concerns, or would like just more information, please contact me at my email address below, or Dr. Carr at VCU ACE. Her email is also below. Angie, we really appreciate you being here. I'm glad it's been such a good experience for you. Thank you. And thank you, Staci.