



Finding the Best Northern Virginia Schools for Your Child on the ASD Spectrum

POAC-NoVA is often asked about the “best” schools for children on the ASD spectrum. This question often comes from people who are moving to the area or who live here, but are looking to make a change in their child’s schooling. We all wish we had the answer to this question, but the answer varies according to the needs of your child. If your child has complex and severe needs the answer may be far different than if your child is “twice exceptional” and has academic capabilities, but needs behavioral and/or emotional support. Individual schools vary over time according to their leadership, staff and even their mix of students.

We’ve tried to give parents some basic information about each school district below. We suggest you use this information as one resource in your search. Once you have narrowed your search we strongly suggest you visit any schools that may be appropriate for your child—this may include your base school and/or a school that offers specialized services for your child’s primary educational disability (usually, but not always, autism). Certain signs that may indicate “better” program fits include how open administrators are to exploring options for your child (identifying an individualized program to meet your child’s needs rather than fitting your child into a program), how communicative the staff is, how experienced and stable the staff is (keeping in mind there’s a lot of turnover in special education and that the best teachers have to start somewhere) and whether the educational and behavioral needs of the other students in the program seem to reflect those of your child. Often schools with disability-based centers have the best grasp of evidence-based practices and available resources for children with those disabilities. POAC-NoVA endorses applied behavioral analysis (ABA), including verbal behavior approaches, as the educational backbone for supporting our children, but we have also strongly supported executive functioning curriculum (ie, Unstuck and On Target) and other educational practices with strong evidence bases. Students on the spectrum accessing the general education or accelerated curriculum may receive ABA through behavioral support services. Ask the schools you visit which strategies they use for a child like yours. More information about counties’ programs for students on the ASD spectrum is shown in Table 2.

We looked at several NoVA school jurisdictions (Alexandria City, Arlington County, Fairfax County, Falls Church City, Loudoun County, Manassas City, Manassas Park City, and Prince William County) in order to find out what types of programs they offered and how well they were meeting special education targets established by the state. A comparison of school districts is difficult and perhaps, in some cases, unfair. Some of the districts are cities with one high school (Alexandria, Falls Church, Manassas, Manassas Park). In contrast, the largest jurisdiction, Fairfax County, has 28 high schools. The counties vary tremendously in size—student enrollment in Fairfax is double the size of the second largest county, Prince William. Fairfax County also has almost triple the number of students with autism of the next largest county (Prince William) and maintains seven centers that serve children with the most severe and complex disabilities, including some from neighboring jurisdictions. Arlington is the smallest county in terms of population. Demographics and resources available to schools may also vary tremendously in these jurisdictions. Key statistics about each school jurisdiction are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Virginia Department of Education Overall School Performance and Enrollment (Academic Year 2015/16)

	Enrollment	Students with Autism	%ASD in student body
Fairfax	187,510	3518	1.88%
Prince William	89,378	1365	1.53%
Loudoun	78,713	1325	1.68%
Arlington	26,176	513	1.96%
Alexandria City	15,418	187	1.21%
Manassas City	7713	91	1.18%
Manassas Park	3588	60	1.67%
Falls Church City	2672	42	1.57%

Fully Accredited Schools

BEST: Arlington County, Manassas Park 100%

WORST: Alexandria City 75%

Reading Proficiency:

BEST: Falls Church City 93%

RUNNER UP: Arlington, Loudoun 87%

WORST: Alexandria City 71% (Manassas City 72%)

Math Proficiency:

BEST: Falls Church City 88%

RUNNER UP: Arlington County 86%

WORST: Alexandria City 66% (Manassas City 74%)

Table 2. Programs for Students on the Autism Spectrumⁱ

	ABA-BASED OR AUTISM- SPECIFIC PROGRAMS (SCHOOL AGED)	PRESCHOOL PROGRAMS FOR AUTISM	OTHER DISABILITY PROGRAMS USED TO SERVE CHILDREN ON ASD SPECTRUM	USE OF EB EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING CURRICULUM	USE OF EB SOCIAL SKILLS CURRICULUM	SPECIALIZED BEHAVIORAL SUPPORTS	SUPPORT FOR PARENTS	PROGRAMS FOR TWICE EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS	OTHER
ALEXANDRIA CITYⁱⁱ	No	No	Multidisciplinary classrooms	See other	See other	Behavioral specialists: autism resource team	Training for IEP team involvement		ACPS utilizes a wide variety of teaching strategies which may or may not include some of the following for students with ASD: Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication Handicapped Children), Picture Communication Exchange Systems (PECS), Social Skills Teaching, Structured Teaching, The STAR (Strategies for Teaching based on Autism Research) curriculum, SCERTS (focusing on social communication, emotional

									regulation and transactional support) and various sensory strategies.
ARLINGTON ⁱⁱⁱ ^{iv}	Multi-Intervention Program for Students with Autism; Functional Life Skills; Cross categorical self contained with inclusion	Mini MiPA; Cross categorical ; gen ed with resource support	Interlude for Social/Emotional Disabilities; Stratford Program for Severe Disabilities; Communications Program (not for ID)	Unstuck and On Target available to those in Secondary Program for High-Functioning Students with Autism	PEERS Curriculum available to those in Secondary Program for High-Functioning Students with Autism	Tiered Levels of Support used Countywide	Parent Academy Classes	Secondary Program for High-Functioning Students with Autism	STARS Program and LINKS Curriculum used with some students in MiPA
FAIRFAX	Enhanced Autism Classrooms; ABA-based secondary sites	Preschool Autism Classroom s; Non-Categorical; gen ed with support	Comprehensive Service Centers, ID, Special Public Day School Centers; Non-Categorical (Multidisability) Programs	Yes— Unstuck and on Target; Unstuck for Life; Flexible Futures other EF curricula used in Strategies for Success	Teachtown; Social Thinking; other	ABA Coaches available to all Schools; Positive Behavior Improvement Support is a Tier 1 intervention at most schools	ABA Workshops , Parent Resource Center programs, active Advisory Committee for Students with Disabilities	Personal Development Classes; Behavioral Support available at all levels	Adaptive PE; Career and Work Transition Classes starting in middle school with 2 post secondary sites Afterschool Interventions at Some Schools ABA and Verbal Behavior Fundamentals and Hands On ABA Training required for all Instructional staff in ABA programs;

<p>FALLS CHURCH CITY^v</p>	<p>No</p>	<p>Special Needs Preschool using Second Step</p>		<p>Implementing Unstuck and On Target</p>	<p>Teachtown</p>	<p>ED specialist; behavior specialists; response to intervention specialists (collateral duty)</p>	<p>Library and website</p>	<p>VCU ACE training for paraprofessionals VCU ACE training for paraprofessionals; excellent staff to student ratios; good related services (PT, OT, Speech)</p>
<p>LOUDOUN^{viii}</p>	<p>Self contained and intensive self-contained classroom for autism</p>	<p>ECSE (early childhood special education & ECSE-A Early Childhood Special Education – Autism. Also, select schools have a cross-categorical program that has half typical developing preschool children and half special needs</p>	<p>Multidisciplinary</p>	<p>The SEAC has stressed a need to develop a program that addresses executive functioning and are aware that many parents are asking for assistance for their children – but NO Program exists</p>	<p>SEAC recommended that LCPS implement social skills interventions at all levels, but no program exists</p>	<p>Special education supervisor at each school; Autism Supervisor; Autism program specialists (teacher resource); elementary and secondary autism specialists; specialized instruction facilitator for autism</p>	<p>Autism Workshops ; Parent Resource Centers</p>	<p>No program exists Autism Program Specialists used for training and oversight of teachers and programs; VCU-ACE program cited as a source for training and resources. – This program is in the development phase and no program is currently in a complete phase or mandatory for all teachers to complete. It is just recommended training.</p>

			children. These classes get filled quickly and are not offered at many schools)				
MANASSAS CITY^{viii}			Early Childhood Special Education Program		Autism specialist and behavioral specialist at Administrative Level	Parent Resource Center; SEAC meets quarterly	
MANASSAS PARK CITY							
PRINCE WILLIAM COUNTY^{ix}	Self contained classroom and supports for multidisabilities	Continuum of preschool programs	Public Day School for school-aged children with most Complex Disabilities—new facility, but staffing must improve			Parent Resource Center; SEAC	VCU-ACE training for paraprofessionals working primarily with ASD

Arlington County: Arlington has a wide range of programs for students on the spectrum, including its Multi-intervention Program for Autism (MiPA) for school-aged children and mini-MiPA for preschoolers—we have heard reports of waiting lists for mini-MiPAs. MiPA programs draw from ABA practices, but also rely upon other evidence-based practices. It has a secondary school program that targets development of executive functioning and social skills for children primarily served in general education settings, but participants in the program must use 2 electives for each semester of participation. Other students requiring these skills who do not qualify for the executive functioning and social skills curriculum must address goals within their IEPs. ACPS has autism specialists and low incidence specialists who train staff who are available to consult with IEP teams relating to communications and behavioral needs with FBAs and BIPs are needed.

Fairfax County: Fairfax County has long been considered a national leader in special education and services for students with autism, yet it struggled to meet many state targets including for drop outs, placing children in the least restrictive environment, and parent involvement. The presence of seven specialized public day schools and other programs that serve children with the most severe and complex disabilities—including some from neighboring school jurisdictions-- may explain some of this variation. Fairfax County's large size and relative wealth allows it to provide a broad range of programs to meet the diverse range of needs of children with autism and other children with IEPs. It is the only district that has classrooms for children on the spectrum dedicated to instruction based upon applied behavioral analysis—an evidence-based educational practice endorsed by POAC-NoVA. While it was the first to have behavioral specialists to assist teachers with managing challenging behavior, Loudoun, Falls Church and Alexandria City now have this resource. Fairfax County also embraces best practices and emerging curriculum, such as Teach Town, Social Thinking, Unstuck and On Target and its associated programs for teens and young adults with executive function challenges and social skills curriculum. It has also been able to offer ABA workshops to parents with children in ABA-based classrooms in addition to programs addressing a wider variety of issues in high incidence disability groups and typically developing children (dyslexia, discipline, anxiety, ADHD) through its Parent Resource Center. In addition to non-categorical disability programs, Fairfax County also uses disability focused programs that address different sets of deficits including intellectual disabilities and for children on the ASD spectrum who have more academic skills but have behavioral challenges that interfere with general education classroom participation.

Loudoun County: LCPS has a number of autism specialists and supports in place to serve as instructional resources. According to a SEAC representative, however, Loudoun County's rapid growth in the schools has led to severe systemic issues that SEAC has identified year after year in the annual report to the LCPS School Board. Concerned local politicians requested that VDOE investigate LCPS after some widely publicized issues with inappropriate use of restraint and seclusion. LCPS is unable to train staff fully with fidelity. Use of programs vary from school to school. Since not all LCPS schools offer all programs some students with disabilities have unduly long bus rides. LCPS has recently stopped allowing the child's private BCBA for observations. They have also recently drafted a policy that no longer allows parents to take data for their children. Some parents complain of a lack of transparency in LCPS.

Manassas City: Program officials reported that they offered children on the spectrum access to all levels of schooling from full inclusion to special classrooms and offered special autism supports. It offers public day school for students with most complex needs. They reported using Unstuck and On Target and Social Thinking as evidence-based programs for executive functioning and social skills. They have some resource staff that specialize in autism to assist with behavioral support and serve as contacts for parents.

Virginia Department of Education Special Education Performance Targets

Virginia’s Department of Education has established state targets for 14 indicators to assess special education in all of its school jurisdictions. The data used for this assessment is from academic year 2015/6—the most recent posted on the public website

http://www.doe.virginia.gov/special_ed/reports_plans_stats/special_ed_performance/division/2015-2016/index.shtml

Overall, the jurisdiction that met the most state targets was Loudoun County meeting targets within 9 of the fourteen indicators. Falls Church City also did well, but for some of the indicators the City lacked the population to measure performance. It also may lack the population base to address children with the most complex disabilities (these children may be addressed in private schools or other settings, including Fairfax County public day schools or centers) which may make success with some indicators easier to achieve. Alexandria met seven of 14 indicators and Manassas Park met six of the 13 it had enough students to assess. Arlington, Fairfax and Manassas met 6 of the 14 indicators each. Prince William County met the criteria for the fewest indicators (4). None of our local school systems were found to have an overrepresentation of racial or ethnic groups labeled disabled due to misidentification; only one local school system was found to have policy that led to more suspensions and expulsions for disabled children (Alexandria). All were found to include disabled students in statewide testing, but only one jurisdiction made the state target for performance (Falls Church City in reading only). No local systems made AMOs (for improvement in standardized testing).

Table 3. SELECTED MEASURES FROM VIRGINIA DEPT OF EDUCATION SPECIAL EDUCATION INDICATORS (2015-2016)

Y=Met State Target; N=Did not Meet State Target; Partial= Met Some of Targets within Indicator

	Alexandria City	Arlington County	Fairfax County	Falls Church City	Loudoun County	Manassas City	Manassas Park City	Prince William County
Graduation with Standard Diploma (>57.84%)	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N
Dropouts (<1.7%)	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N	N
Performance on Standardized Reading (>66%) and Math (>65%)Tests	N	N	N	Y	N	N	N	N
	N	N	N	Partial (reading target met)	N	N	N	N

School aged LRE-More than 80% in gen ed (>69%)	N	N	N	Y	N	N	N	N
School aged LRE-Less than 10% in gen ed for less than 40% (<10%)	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N	N	N
School aged LRE-private schools or other segregated (<3%)	N	N	N	N	Y	Y	N	N
Preschool Least Restrictive Environment Measures	Y	Partial	N	Partial	N	N	Partial	N
Parent Satisfaction with Involvement in Improving Services (>70%)	N	N	N	N	Y	Y	Y	N
Secondary IEP Goals and Transition Services (100%)	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Post-Secondary Outcomes	Partial	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Partial	Partial

ⁱ POAC-NoVA attempted to identify online public documents identifying the features of programs available in each school jurisdiction. Where possible we asked members with children in these jurisdictions, most of whom are SEAC members, to corroborate findings.

ⁱⁱ City of Alexandria Public Schools website, <https://www.acps.k12.va.us/cms/lib/VA01918616/Centricity/Domain/51/autism-plan.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Arlington County Public Schools website, <https://www.apsva.us/special-education/autism-services/> accessed, May 2, 2018

^{iv} Juliet Hiznay, JD, Educational Attorney and Arlington County parent

^v JJC and Associates. Special Education Program Review for the City of Falls Church Public Schools: Final Report, June 15, 2017.

^{vi} Loudoun County Public Schools website, <https://www.lcps.org/cms/lib/VA01000195/Centricity/Domain/97/Autism%20Services%20and%20Resources%20in%20LCPS.pdf>

^{vii} Heidi Bankua, SEAC Member

^{viii} Noelle Stanley, SEAC Member

^{ix} Prince William County Public Schools Website, Yukiko Dove, SEAC Member; <https://pwcs.edu/cms/One.aspx?portalId=340225&pageId=755529>